

# Who owns English?

## Questioning the native speaker

**A B S T R A C T** Reporting on his study of the Menomini Indians of Wisconsin, Leonard Bloomfield notes that “some persons are felt to be better models of conduct and speech than others” (Bloomfield 1927:396). Bloomfield was surprised to find such normative attitudes even in “a small community of people speaking a uniform language ... without schools or writing” (Bloomfield 1927:394) and eventually decided that “this may be a generally human state of affairs, true in every group and applicable to all languages” (Bloomfield 1927:396). In this paper, I consider the case of English, the disputes about ownership, norms and models which come together in the arguments about the native speaker (Davies 2003). What the Bloomfield quote above suggests is that even when there is no official standard, there is always a norm. I ask the question: which model should be used to develop an official standard for a language/dialect/variety that has no official standard? Can the native speaker, however marginalized, be ignored? In support of my argument, I discuss five current critiques of the native speaker: World Englishes, *négritude* and the anglophone response, English as a Lingua Franca, judgements by Native Speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) raters of second language (L2) performance, second language acquisition research and the unbridgeable gulf and conclude by distinguishing between the real and the idealized native speaker, which, in the case of English, is an instantiation of the Standard Language.

### 1. English and World Englishes

World Englishes refers to the spread of English, first by the settler communities (e.g. North America, Australia), the second the (ex) colonial communities (e.g. India, Nigeria) and third, the English as a foreign language communities (e.g. Japan, Germany). These correspond to Kachru's inner, outer and expanded circles (Kachru 1992).

The term (World Englishes) symbolizes the functional and formal variations, divergent sociolinguistic contexts, ranges and varieties of English in creativity and various types of acculturation in parts of the Western and non-western world. This concept emphasizes **WE-ness** and not the dichotomy between **us** and **them** (the native and non-native users). (Kachru 1992: 20)

A continuing debate is how far the norms of the inner circle continue to dominate the outer circle and whether the expanding circle is, as Kachru maintains, norm-dependent. This can be presented as which native speaker is regarded as the model or norm in World Englishes communities with regard to choices about education, the media (such as television announcers), the public service medium and so on. In my view this is an issue only for the members of the various communities, not for the hegemony of the inner circle. If Singaporeans, for example, wish to apply norms of Singapore English, that must be their choice. This view holds good for other such communities, Malaysia, India, Nigeria and so on. However, it seems unclear whether that is what they really want, especially when it comes to institutional uses, education in particular since education feeds into and prepares for all other formal uses. National identity is complex and often heteroglossic. You can be Singaporean by being proficient in Chinese, Singlish and some form of inner circle Standard English. That does not imply that it is typical for a Singaporean to be proficient in some form of Inner Circle English.

Underlying many of the remarks by postcolonial apologists is their failure to acknowledge that English in the world at the start of the 21st century is a special case. This denial of a special status for native speakers of English is surely ideological, belonging to an argument about the role of English in a world filled with World Englishes, where there are more L2 than first language (L1) speakers of English. In this context there is a political point to be made in opposing the privileged position of the Old Variety of English (OVE) native speaker/user. Rajagopalan maintains~: ‘the quest for the pure native is part of a larger agenda that in other epochs manifested itself – and in some quarters still does – as the quest for the pure race’ (Rajagopalan 1997: 229). Since there are no ‘viable and fool-proof criteria for identifying a native’ (Rajagopalan 1997:228), then all that is left is the ‘myth of nativity’ (Rajagopalan 1997: 229).

Are such sentiments specific to English? Or are they generalisable? Would these critics make the same point about Welsh or Basque or Menomini or Kikuyu? Clearly they are making a political point and an understandable one, given the inequities of the world. It is worth remembering that English is not itself a cause of those inequities, rather, it is a correlative. Kachru does not accept that his argument is political. In his view, Quirk ignores the central issue of sociolinguistic realities in outer-circle societies (Bolton 2004: 378). There are after all countries and societies with high levels of English (e.g. Kerala) which remain very poor. But that said, if native speakers’ privilege is controlled, is it still the case that there is no special status to be accorded to native speakers of English? Graddol writes of the ‘decline of the native speaker’ and asks the “tantalising question: ...large numbers of people will learn English as a Foreign Language in the 21st century ... But will they continue to look towards the native speaker for authoritative norms of usage?” (Graddol 1999: 68).

What both Rajagopalan (1999) and Canagarajah (1999) helpfully do is to argue strongly (as Medgyes 1999 does) for the valorising of the L2 teacher of English while at the same time reassuring professional colleagues that in teaching English as a Foreign Language (or indeed English as a Second Language (ESL)) they are not acting as instruments of linguistic imperialism. This needs to be said by those who, it has been claimed, are victims of this globalising process. Rajagopalan attacks the “alarmist thesis that the teaching of English to speakers of other languages is an outrageous act of aggression” (Rajagopalan 1999: 202). And Canagarajah, who

yields to no-one in his critique of the power of English in the periphery, makes very clear that scholars and teachers in the periphery are not dupes, that they are perfectly capable of operating “subtle forms of resistance to English” (Canagarajah 1999: 3), appropriating from it what they need. And he puts a question mark against the absolutist strategy advocated by Ngugi: “there are many reason why (his) oppositional strategy may be ill conceived ... this is not a solution to the ideological challenges, but an escape from it”(Canagarajah 1999: 177).

## 2. Négritude and Language Loss

In his *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* (1956), the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire explores the sense of language loss by using a combination of literary French and Martinican colloquialisms in an attempt to fashion a language of resistance and liberation, rejecting the ideology of colonisation.

Césaire coined the word *Négritude* as an attempt to reappropriate the word *nègre* which had painful connotations for all Black people (Rosello 1995: 46).

The *Cahier* celebrated the idea of *négritude* which is the name given to the cultural, philosophical and political movement co-founded in Paris in the 1930s by three black francophone intellectuals, Leon-Gontran Damas (French Guiana), Leopold Senghor (Senegal) and Aimé Césaire. The ethos of the *négritude* movement was a reaction against those features of French colonialism, assimilation through becoming *évolué* and *civilisé*, the very qualities which all three had achieved great success in. These francophone writers railed against what they felt to be a colonisation of their minds and intellect: they maintained that they had lost their *black* identity (hence *négritude*). What was ironic was that their challenges to their francoisation could only be published in French. For as Kincaid wrote:

... what I see is the millions of people of whom I am just one, made orphans: no motherland, no fatherland, no god ... and worse and most painful of all, no tongue ... For isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed this crime (Kincaid 1988: 43).

Anglophone African and Caribbean writers had, it seems, moved on from the early insouciance of Wole Soyinka who, when asked about his concern for *négritude* responded that he was unconcerned, there had been no loss. ‘A tiger’, he said, “does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces. In other words: a tiger does not stand in the forest and say: I am a tiger” (Soyinka 1964).

But by the late 1970s, attitudes had hardened. There was the sense of loss, there was distress, there was anger. James Ngugi (wa ‘Thiongo) chose to switch from publishing his novels in English to publishing them in Kikuyu, his first language. There is a paradox here, and we see it among the francophones. They protested about French in Standard French, much as Kincaid points out. Ngugi was bitter: “The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (Ngugi 1988: 9 quoted in Punter 2000: 17).

Why this difference in attitude between francophone and anglophone writers from French and British colonial territories? One plausible explanation is that it was related to the very different philosophies of colonial government under the two states. France, especially since Napoleon, has been a centralising power, dedicated to one view of culture including language. As France expanded its colonial reach in the nineteenth century it extended this idea of everywhere it

controlled being France, ruled, in all cases, directly from Paris. Britain early on established local rule whereby heritage rulers were left in power as long as they kept the peace, paid their taxes and did not interfere with affairs outside their traditional borders. This form of government, known as indirect rule, is associated with the colonial administrator Lord Lugard (Walder 1998:36). While France required all education to be in French, Britain allowed the use of the local language as the medium of instruction, at least in primary schools.

The strong form of the *négritude* construct must be that language and thought are isomorphic. Abiola Irélé (1964: 11) writes

the capital point about the movement (*négritude*) is its ideological implication. The black poet's descent into himself is an effort to disalienate his being and to re-establish a concordance with a distinct essence. For this reason he reconstitutes this essence as much as he can from the remains in him of the African heritage.

This seems to be as good as saying that you can't be really African (and in particular a Black African writer) in a language imposed from outside, in this case French.

What perplexed francophone writers on *négritude* was that they could write only in French: they had no recourse to a traditional L1, at least not in writing. Why not? Because they had been schooled in French. It seems plausible that they ignored any speech-writing divide and felt as much trapped in their speech as in their writing. For their contemporary anglophone writers speech and writing were not the same; they could be African in speech, either their L1 or some form of African English, and accept that their writing had to be structurally in Standard English.

Achebe bravely believed in hybridity:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience .... But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (Achebe 1964: 61,2)

It seems important to maintain a clear distinction between the spoken and the written codes. Speech may – and often does – involve the local, writing less so, which explains how difficult it is for everyone to become literate. The dilemma for the writer may be that what s/he wants to write is not possible in what Kincaid called 'the language of the criminal' but is that what Irish writers think when they write, as they mostly do, in English, or J.M. Coetzee when he writes in English and not in his native Afrikaans?

### **3. English as a Lingua Franca: ELF**

The term English as a lingua franca (ELF) in the research of Seidlhofer (2004) and Jenkins (2000) may be understood as a (new) code used for interaction among NNS.

Seidlhofer (2004) recognises that so far there is little evidence on which to base a model: "the bulk of the descriptive work still needs to be done" (Seidlhofer, 2004: 8). However, she does offer

a few pointers. She emphasises Jenkins's work on phonology (Jenkins, 2000), "culminating in what she (Jenkins) has termed the Lingua Franca Core (which will assess which phonological features are – and which are not – essential for intelligible pronunciation when English is spoken in lingua franca contexts)" (Jenkins 2000: 5) But those words 'which phonological features' raise the question of what, to which the answer has to be of L1 native speaker English. In other words, intelligibility is possible even with a reduced set of educated L1 native speaker phonemes. Again, in her section on pragmatics, Seidlhofer tells us that "some fairly clear insights are emerging" (Seidlhofer, 2004: 6). In general what these studies of ELF pragmatics appear to show is a greater tolerance among ELF speakers – they are less focused on form, more concerned with reaching for the message. Seidlhofer quotes McKay (2002) with approval, that what matters is intelligibility rather than correctness. Thus, misunderstandings are resolved by communication strategies, interference from L1 interactional norms is rare. Over all, ELF talk seems to be "overtly consensus-oriented, cooperative and mutually supportive, and thus fairly robust" (McKay 2004: 6)

Mauranen (2003) discusses a particular variety of ELF, an academic NNS-NNS register. She maintains that the academic texts in the corpus collected in Tampere, Finland, show marked pragmatic features such as hedging and self-repair. The interactions she describes belong primarily to a Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) variety and as such may conceivably be sub-sets of L1 English. The pragmatic features she instances are, after all, found in regular use in L1 NS speech. If there is a greater preponderance of such features, that is interesting but interesting from an LSP not an ELF point of view, unless it could be demonstrated that hedging and self-repair are more prevalent across all domains of ELF use than is the case for Standard English.

An example from Firth (1991) illustrates the point quite well. The following conversation takes place between a Danish exporter/producer of cheese (A) and one of his international buyers, a Saudi Arabian based Indian importer/wholesaler (B), both NNS of English

- 1 B: ... *so I told him not to send the cheese after the, the blowing (.) in the customs. We don't want the order after the cheese is blowing*
- 2 A: *I see, yes.*
- 3 B: *So I don't know what we can do with the order now. What do you think we should do with this is all blowing mister Hansen?*
- 4 A: *I'm not er (0.7) blowing er what er, what is this er too big or what?*
- 5 B: *no the cheese is bad mister Hansen, it is like fermenting in the customs' cool rooms.*
- 6 A: *ah it's gone off*
- 7 B: *yes it's gone off*
- 8 A: *well you know, you don't have to do anything because it's not... (turn continues)*  
*(from Firth (modified) 1991: 275)*

What is important here is that is that the communication problem was successfully repaired by the conversational partners concerned, both of whom show strategic resourcefulness. A eventually (in turn 4) signals lack of understanding and B is able to disambiguate through suppliance of an alternative term *ferment* and quickly adjusts and responds to A's use of the more colloquial term *gone off*.

Such strategic competence on a test of ELF would presumably take precedence over linguistic accuracy but it is unclear who judges and by what rules: each encounter would need to be judged on its own terms which would make the writing of a syllabus or of a test problematic.

#### **4. Judgements by NS and NNS raters of L2 performance**

In a recent empirical study I compared judgements (ratings) of English speaking and writing performances by two groups of NNS students, one in Belgium, the other in Malaysia. In both cases, tests were carried out and ratings by local judges organised. These judgements were then compared with judgements by UK based native speakers of English. The results show no significant differences between the local raters and the UK raters. What this suggests is either that both local and UK raters are appealing to the same standard language norms, or that there is no significant difference between local and UK norms, that is that if the local WEs and the UK standard language are distinct, they are very close. Furthermore, what it also suggests is that non-native speakers (my local judges) are not fundamentally different from native speaker judges: in other words the native – non native speaker distinction is a continuum and not a gulf.

I turn now to the empirical study. The research question was that there would be no significant differences between the NS and the NNS raters. Two tests were conducted, both based on the IELTS publicly available practice tests. One was a speaking test: this consisted of a 10-12 minute oral interview with one interviewer (me) who recorded the interview. The writing tests consisted of two writing tasks. The first (20 minutes) required an analysis of data presented in the form of a graph or table. The second (40 minutes) asked for an opinion on a current social topic. The tests were carried out in early 2009, at the University of Ghent (Belgium) and at the University of Malaya (Malaysia). There were 48 test takers in Ghent and 44 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. All test takers were students, a mixture of under- and post-graduates.

There were 26 raters in all: 10 Belgians, 6 Malaysians and 10 British native speakers. The Belgians and Malaysians were all NNS, university teachers of English. All raters listened to a 5/6 minute segment of the interview once only. They were asked to rate for fluency and coherence on a 9 point scale, using the IELTS band descriptors. Raters were asked to read the two essays and give one overall subjective/impressionistic mark on the scale of 1-9, taking account of effectiveness, tone and style.

For the writing test, the ten Belgian raters carried out their ratings of the Belgian candidates over a period of one and a half days, all sitting together in one room. All scripts were given numbers and their candidate names were removed. For the Speaking test, the recordings were played through loudspeakers: there was no suggestion of any acoustic difficulty. The Malaysian raters (6 for Speaking, 5 for writing), working with the Malaysian candidates, carried out their writing ratings at home. The Speaking ratings were done in three small group sessions. It was hoped to recruit more local raters (to a desired N = 10) for both speaking and writing, but this was not possible. The NS raters, all experienced TEFL teachers, rated both the Belgian and the Malaysian candidates. The writing ratings were carried out at home. The speaking ratings were conducted in one large room, again using loudspeakers, over the course of one long day.

Facet analyses were carried out. There were no significant differences between the NS raters and the NNS raters (both the Belgian and the Malaysian). On consistency for both speaking and

writing, the NS were more consistent than the Malaysians and the Belgians more consistent than the NSs. On severity for speaking, the NS raters were more severe than the Malaysians and the Belgians more severe than the NSs. On severity for writing, the NS raters were more severe than both the Malaysians and the Belgians.

My conclusion is that the NS and the NNS raters make similar judgments; they belong to the same speech community. Both NS and NNS raters apply Standard English norms. In other words, judges in an outer circle country such as Malaysia behave in much the same ways as judges in an expanding circle country such as Belgium, both applying L1 standard English norms. What this suggests is that the difference between NS and NNS is a continuum rather than a gulf.

A caveat is necessary about this finding. It is this: in order to become near native speakers of English through their education, both groups of NNS raters must have taken as their norms – and indeed still do – the same Standard English that the NS raters themselves take. In their own daily lives they may well operate more local norms. But when it comes to judging performance on a formal basis it seems likely that they will make instinctive, implicit use of the standard English norms they were themselves taught as students. If that is the case, then the same must hold true when it comes to taking an international English language proficiency test, again a formal performance.

Zhang and Elder (2011) reach a similar conclusion. They compared NS and NNS raters on the Chinese College (speaking) English Test. They noted that the NNS raters emphasised form while the NS raters were more concerned with communicative ability. At the same time, they found no significant differences on either consistency or severity between the NS and the NNS raters. If we accept that the native speaker operationalizes itself both for native speakers and for non-native speakers as the standard language, then the gulf between them disappears. And since the standard language is the object of institutional learning both for NS and for NNS, then the fundamental difference hypothesis appears less appealing than the continuum hypothesis.

## **5. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and the unbridgeable gulf**

Doughty and Long (2003) write that while SLA does, of course take place in a social context, because it is “ultimately a matter of change in an individual’s internal mental state ..... research in SLA is increasingly viewed as a branch of cognitive science” (Doughty & Long 2003: 4).

This focus on cognition helps explain the interest in the role of maturation and in the status of the native speaker in relation to SLA. Hence the painstaking research of Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson. They conclude that:

‘both adults in rare cases, and children in most cases, seem to reach native-like proficiency in a second language.’ (However) ‘given that maturation has the strong influence on second language outcomes that our review has indicated, it should come as no surprise that native-like proficiency in a second language is unattainable. (Even so) the subtle differences that we have assumed to exist between near-native and native proficiency are probably highly insignificant in all aspects of the second language speaker’s life and endeavours, although very significant for a theory of human capacity for language learning. The highly successful L2 speakers that we have

characterised as having reached ‘only’ near-native proficiency are, in fact, native-like in all contexts except perhaps in the laboratory of the linguist with specific interest in second language learning mechanisms.’ (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson 2003: 578,580)

This is the fundamental difference hypothesis (Bley Vroman 1989) that indicates that there is an uncrossable divide between the native speaker and the native-like non native speaker. As Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson point out, for most purposes that gap is unimportant. Those who succeed in becoming near native may be assisted by the quality of language aptitude (De Keyser 2000) but while aptitude is “a necessary condition for near-native proficiency on adult learners” (De Keyser, 2000: 580), aptitude, however high, cannot make the near-native become native-like.

David Birdsong has challenged the fundamental gulf position which is, in part, predicated on the critical period hypothesis (CPH) (Long 1990). While many SLA researchers accept the validity of this hypothesis, there is little agreement as to where to place it in terms of years of development and, indeed, whether there is just one CPH (Singleton & Lengyel 1995).

Birdsong sidesteps the CPH by investigating the SLA of adult learners who must by any definition be long past the CPH wherever it is placed. Birdsong points out that for the hardline no-overlap researchers “the typical, if not unique, outcome of L2acquirers is failure or non-native like competence. However, recent research has challenged the notion of universal or near-universal failure ..... native-likeness may not be so rare as to be **peripheral to the enterprise of second language acquisition theory** (Bley-Vroman 1989)...” (Birdsong 2004: 83).

What Birdsong appears to be claiming is that the acquisition of native-likeness is not common, indeed it is rare. But it is possible, which gives the lie to the view accepted by the majority of SLA researchers: “demonstrations of native-likeness represent dramatic counterpoints to received views of the upper limit of L2A, whereby the outcome of L2A is doomed to be inferior to that of L1A” (Birdsong 2004: 93).

Doerr (2009) is scathing about the ideologies behind the native speaker concept: “the belief that the citizens of a nation-state are ‘native speakers’ of the national language, that language as well as a linguistic community are homogeneous and bounded so that native speakers have complete competence in their native language” (Doerr 2009:42). Essentially, Doerr is making the case for variety, that native speakers differ both in the kind of language they possess and in the scope of that language. This is a sensible counterblast to those SLA researchers who seem to assume that the native speaker is unitary and, as such, categorically different from the near native speaker. But, as Birdsong (2004) argues, it is more complicated than that. Institutionally, both the native speaker and the near natives are enjoined to model their language goal on the myth rather than on the reality of the native speaker and this myth is instantiated by the standard language with all its deliberate homogeneity. The standard language is equally a myth but nonetheless a necessary one since education, publishing, administration, the law require a norm which may represent noone’s real language but one to which all aspire. What Davies (2003) argues is (1) that the standard language is precisely the concern of the written language and as such is promoted through the school system; and (2) that while an elite dialect may have been selected in the first instance as the standard language (this is just as true of Chinese,

Swahili, Spanish, French as it is of English), once selected, it then belongs to no one group, always bearing in mind that the written language does not permit the variability (including the class accents) of the spoken language.

## 6. Coda: who owns English?

There are native speakers and there is The Native Speaker: the first is all of us, the second an idealization. We are all native speakers of one or other code, language, idiolect. Some of us are educated, some not, some literate, some not, some creative orators, some not, and so on. The idea that all native speakers are at level C2 on the Council of Europe Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale makes no sense. Some perhaps are, but they are unusual. C2 is the level of The Native Speaker, an idealization, isomorphic with the Standard Language, itself an idealization. Models, scales, examinations which use as criterion the native speaker appeal not to any or all native speakers but to the idealized Native Speaker. It is not surprising therefore that a group of educated non-native speakers will on occasion out-perform a group of native speakers on a proficiency test. What their education has done for the non-native speakers is to imbue them with the knowledge of the idealized Native Speaker, that is of the Standard Language. Proficiency tests are all about knowledge of the Standard Language, which is exactly what non-native speakers have been trained in.

Who then owns English? There are two answers: first everyone who uses the language; second, no-one since **English** is a construct. English, like other languages, is both real (there are native speakers) and ideal, the Chomsky ideal speaker-hearer or, as I prefer, the Standard Language. What the Bloomfield quote in my abstract suggests is that even when there is no official standard, there is always a norm. And so the question I end with is which model should be used to develop an official standard for a language/dialect that has no official standard? Can the native speaker, however marginalized, be ignored?

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