Displacing the 'native speaker': expertise, affiliation, and inheritance

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The concepts native speaker and mother tongue are often criticized, but they continue in circulation in the absence of alternatives. This article suggests some. The terms language expertise, language inheritance, and language affiliation sort out some of the mystification, and they allow us to place educational questions of language ability and language loyalty alongside a broader view of society.¹

The whole mystique of the native speaker and the mother tongue should probably be quietly dropped from the linguist's set of professional myths about language.²

Mystique and myth

Braj Kachru and Charles Ferguson are not alone in this observation, and dissatisfaction with the terms native speaker and mother tongue is now very widespread. At the same time, these terms seem to be very resilient, and efforts to modify them just end up testifying indirectly to their power. For example, a good deal of effort is now being made to show the independent legitimacy of Englishes worldwide, but when these are described as the other tongue or nativized varieties, the English of the ethnic Anglos is still there in the background as the central reference point. There is a need for new terms and this article suggests some.

The trouble with the native speaker

It is important first of all to be clear about what the problems actually are. Otherwise, alterations may be simply cosmetic. In an educational context, the idea of being the native speaker of a language and having it as your mother tongue tends to imply at least five things:

1 A particular language is inherited, either through genetic endowment or through birth into the social group stereotypically associated with it.
2 Inheriting a language means being able to speak it well.
3 People either are or are not native/mother-tongue speakers.
4 Being a native speaker involves the comprehensive grasp of a language.
5 Just as people are usually citizens of one country, people are native speakers of one mother tongue.

All these connotations are now strongly contested by many people. The capacity for language itself may be genetically endowed, but particular...
languages are acquired in social settings. It is sociolinguistically inaccurate to think of people belonging to only one social group, once and for all. People participate in many groups (the family, the peer group, and groups defined by class, region, age, ethnicity, gender, etc.): membership changes over time and so does language. Being born into a group does not mean that you automatically speak its language well—many native speakers of English can't write or tell stories, while many non-native speakers can. Nobody's functional command is total: users of a language are more proficient in some areas than others. And most countries are multilingual: from an early age children normally encounter two or more languages. Yet despite the criticisms, the terms native speaker and mother tongue remain in circulation, continuously insinuating their assumptions.

There are always ideological issues involved in discussions about who speaks what in education, and political interests often have a stake in maintaining the use of these concepts. Thus the supremacy of the native speaker keeps the UK and the US at the centre of ELT: at the opposite end of the scale, governments may use the notion of mother tongue to imply that certain languages are of interest only to particular minority groups, thereby denying either a language or its speakers full involvement in mainstream education. On its own, altering terminology does little to change this state of affairs, but by inserting or removing particular assumptions, alteration can clarify or usefully redirect our understanding.

As concepts, mother tongue and native speaker link together several ideas which it is vital to separate. Summarizing the problem with these concepts, we can say that:

1. They spuriously emphasize the biological at the expense of the social. Biological factors doubtless do count in language learning, but they never make themselves felt in a direct and absolute way. Their influence is only ever interpreted in social context, and so to a considerable extent, they are only as important as society chooses to make them.

2. They mix up language as an instrument of communication with language as a symbol of social identification.

Recognition of the first difficulty helps to direct our search for alternative terms. Our selections must acknowledge the social nature of the processes which link people to particular languages. They must be able to connect productively with our wider understanding of society. With that requirement in mind, we can then begin to address the second difficulty.

When educationalists have the communicative aspects of language in mind, they should speak of accomplished users as expert rather than as native speakers. Expertise has the following advantages over nativeness as a metaphor for considering language proficiency:

1. Although they often do, experts do not have to feel close to what they know a lot about. Expertise is different from identification.

2. Expertise is learned, not fixed or innate.
3 Expertise is relative. One person's expert is another person's fool.

4 Expertise is partial. People can be expert in several fields, but they are never omniscient.

5 To achieve expertise, one goes through processes of certification, in which one is judged by other people. Their standards of assessment can be reviewed and disputed. There is also a healthy tradition of challenging 'experts'.

The notion of expertise overcomes at least some of the problems. It is also fairer to both learners and teachers. Firstly, if native-speaker competence is used to set targets and define proficiency, the learner is left playing a game in which the goal-posts are being perpetually moved by people they cannot often challenge. But if you talk about expertise, then you commit yourself to specifying much more closely the body of knowledge that students have to aim at. Learning and teaching become much more accountable. In addition, the notion of expert shifts the emphasis from 'who you are' to 'what you know', and this has to be a more just basis for the recruitment of teachers.

Expertise does not, however, cover the ways in which language can stand as a symbol of social group identification. This is a very important issue in education, and it is also strongly connoted in the terms native language and mother tongue. To emphasize that symbolic value, a term like language loyalty (or language allegiance) needs to be added alongside language expertise.

In fact, two aspects of language loyalty are worth distinguishing: inheritance and affiliation. It is particularly important to use a specific term to stake out the claims of the second (language affiliation) in order to make sure that the shadowy authority of notions like native language don't lead us to give pride of place to the first (inheritance).

Both affiliation and inheritance are negotiated. This is fairly self-evident with affiliation, which we commonly think of in terms of the social processes that it involves (requesting, applying, granting, agreeing, breaking off, etc.). But it is also true in the case of inheritance. Governments make laws about it; people try to decide what cultural and material items to include in their legacies; while others accept, claim, reject, and contest them. The crucial difference between them is that affiliation refers to a connection between people and groups that are considered to be separate or different, whereas inheritance is concerned with the continuity between people and groups who are felt to be closely linked. Inheritance occurs within social boundaries, while affiliation takes place across them.

Because both inheritance and affiliation are matters of social negotiation and conflict, the relationship between them is always flexible, subtle, and responsive to the wider context. It would be very hard to assert definitively that X is a language of inheritance and Y is a language of affiliation—indeed in doing so, you would have to recognize that you were taking up a stance in social debate. People belong to many groups; feelings of group-belonging change, and so do the definitions of groups themselves. New but valued inheritances can emerge from powerful
Inheritance and affiliation compared with other terms

Affiliations, while cherished inheritances can lose their value and be disowned. Wherever language inheritance is involved, there tends to be a sense of the permanent, ancient, or historic. It is important, however, to underline the fact that affiliation can involve a stronger sense of attachment, just as the bond between love partners may be more powerful than the link between parents and children.

There are a great many terms other than mother tongue and native language which are used to describe the ties between speakers and languages. What is the particular value of thinking about language loyalty in terms of inheritance and affiliation? The value of these terms lies in the way they draw attention to language education as a social activity in which efforts are made to manage continuity, change, and the relationship between social groups.

There are, of course, many definitions of languages in terms of when, where, and how much they are learnt and used—first, second, primary, home, school, etc. But these do not go to the heart of language allegiance: it is perfectly possible for someone to regard a language learned at age 35 in college as a part of his or her group inheritance. Other terms focus more directly on group relations—for example, majority and minority language, or ethnic, national, and community language. But, for the three reasons below, these terms are not as incisive or as generally applicable as the notions of language inheritance and language affiliation.

1 Whereas the terms mentioned can all be valuable concepts in particular settings, inheritance and affiliation point to aspects of loyalty that are relevant to all group situations, however they are defined (by family, class, gender, race, region, profession, etc.).

2 There is a tendency to think only of inheritance when terms like ethnic or community language are used, and as a result speakers may get fixed in language categories.

3 Affiliation and inheritance can be used to discuss the position of individuals as well as groups, and this is useful in discussion of education, which generally has to consider both.

Conclusion

Sociolinguistic situations are always very complicated, and it is important to have a number of ways of thinking about the links between people and language. For many purposes, the concepts expertise, inheritance, and affiliation will be inappropriate, and they obviously leave out certain issues that are relevant to language and inter-group relations (for example, as they stand, they don’t treat language enmity). Nevertheless, they help us to think about individual cases and about general situations more clearly than do the concepts native speaker and mother tongue. They tell us to inspect each native speaker’s credentials closely, and they insist that we do not assume that nationality and ethnicity are the same as language ability and language allegiance. They also remind us to keep our eyes on social affairs. It is not hard to think of governments which talk about reward according to expertise (‘equality of opportunity’), require smaller groups to relinquish their inheritances, but then only concede...
them affiliate status. The native speaker and the mother tongue clutter our perception of these and other situations.

Received March 1989

Notes
1 I would like to thank Jill Bourne and Dick Hudson for conversations relevant to this article.
4 For a full critique of the ways in which biological and 'natural' explanations of learning have been used to serve particular social ends in language education, see J. Bourne (1988) '“Natural Acquisition” and “Masked Pedagogy”'. Applied Linguistics 9/1: 83–99.

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