



**The Sociolinguistics of
Foreign-Language
Classrooms:
Contributions of the
Native, the Near-native,
and the Non-native
Speaker**



Carl Blyth

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Contributions of the Native, the Near-native, and the Non-native Speaker

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The Native Speaker: Membership Has Its Privileges



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In her essay, Kramersch forcefully argues against the native speaker construct, calling it “imaginary” ... “[an] ideal that corresponds less and less to reality (p. 363).” In the form of a rhetorical question, she exhorts teachers and learners not to abandon “their unique multilingual perspective on the foreign language and on its literature and culture to emulate the idealized monolingual native speaker (p. 360)”. Although her observations are convincing, I will argue that the very belief in the existence of a native speaker motivates many language learners, whose goal is personal transformation by the adoption of behaviors and cultural values imputed to native speakers. The “native speaker”—or the transformed non-native speaker—serve as immediate instantiations of the transformative power of a new language and culture.

Kramersch is dismissive of this motivation, claiming that “more often than not, insiders do not want outsiders to become one of them (as learners of Japanese have often experienced), and even if given the choice, most language learners would not want to become one of them” (p. 364). She continues by asserting that “[t]he pleasure of annexing a foreign language does not primarily consist in identifying with flesh-and-blood native-speaking nationals” (p. 364). I am not certain how Kramersch has arrived at these conclusions. Nevertheless, even if sheer numbers back up her claims, an examination of the autobiographical narratives of French language learners confirms that identification with flesh-and-blood culture bearers is a powerful motivation that cannot be ignored.

That language study transforms a student is both a desired outcome and standard rationale for its inclusion in the curriculum. The formulæ are familiar: language study opens the world, expands horizons, develops critical thinking skills, and builds vocabulary and knowledge of grammar in the native language. Less often mentioned

to the general public, but strikingly present in the autobiographical genre, is the social transformation experienced by students of French. Mastery of French represents a means of improving one's social standing, going beyond one's humble or provincial origins, "passing." Here are some examples.

Alice Kaplan's anxiety over the pronunciation of the French "r" during her initial study in Switzerland betrays her desire to overcome her Midwestern upbringing. Her American "r" is a source of dissatisfaction, an obstacle to her passing for French: "In September my "r" is clunky, the one I've brought with me from Minnesota. It is like cement overshoes, like wearing wooden clogs in a cathedral. It is like any number of large objects in the world—all of them heavy, all of them out of place, all of them obstacles. *Je le heurte*—I come up against it like a wall" (p. 54).

In describing her American "r", Kaplan uses images that may be applied to the peasant, the worker, the socially inferior, the outsider. Mastering the French "r", on the other hand, identifies her as an insider and, by inference, advances her socially: "So that feeling of coming onto the "r" like a wall was part of feeling the essence of my American speech patterns in French, feeling them as foreign and awkward. I didn't know at the time how important it was to feel that American "r" like a big lump in my throat and to be dissatisfied about it. Feeling the lump was the first step, the prerequisite to getting rid of it" (p. 54). Kaplan has discarded her wooden clogs, her peasant status, and presumably feels at ease in the lofty cathedral.

Fowlie describes his acquisition of French as a process that allows him to relive his life in a fresh and better fashion: "When we began using the first phrases in French, such as opening a door and saying that we were doing so, it was not only a new experience in language for me, but I actually seemed to be opening the door in a new way. I seized upon the opportunity of making French into a ritual by means of which I might correct all my past blunders and come fresh upon the universe to manipulate it anew. French was to be, justifiably, my studied and rehearsed approach to life, the very kind I had been searching for unwittingly" (p. 14).

French permits Nelson to transform herself into an upper-class woman, with the distant, authoritarian and even contemptuous attitude that such social status may confer: "I was a French ambassador in and out of my classroom. I was Madame. In everything I said and did I created a French aura about me. In all my note writing to students, parents, administration, and colleagues, my signature was Madame. A certain aura is a must for any teacher" (p. 8).

On another difficult occasion, Nelson met the gaze of her adversary “with a stare more frigid and haughty than his, then I extended my hand in the typical gesture of a French upper-class woman. This was more eloquent than words” (p. 8). Nelson self-identifies as French, a transformation that allows her to assume a superior and unassailable posture.

Gegerias characterizes her method of teaching as a “Cartesian elixir from the ancient art of alchemy” (p. 66) that “transmute[s] basic metals into gold” (p. 70). It is “the matrix for transforming hesitant American students of French into more confident francophiles (p. 65); and the source of an “intellectual transformation” (p. 68).

Before studying French, students were equated with base metals, which, through an alchemist’s (=teacher’s) intervention, could be turned into the social signifier of wealth, status and power: gold. French could transform the mundane into the glamorous, the hesitant into the confident.

While a Cartesian elixir may serve as the instrumentality of transformation and consequent social elevation signified by the French language, in some cases, the sexual act—with a native or perceived native speaker of French—assumed this role. Kaplan describes her affair with André. Years later, after rereading a love letter in which he corrected her French usage, she remarks, “This should have been my first clue that what I really wanted from André was language, but in the short run all it did was make me feel more attached to him, without knowing why I was attached. [...] What I wanted more than anything, more than André even, was to make those sounds, which were the true sounds of being French ...” (p. 86). Reflecting on André’s rejection of her, Kaplan confesses, “I wanted to breathe in French with André, I wanted to sweat French sweat. It was the rhythm and pulse of his French I wanted, the body of it, and he refused me, he told me I could never get that” (p. 94). Rather than being an ameliorative experience, Kaplan’s liaison resulted in physical deformation, the herpes simplex she caught from André, which caused her face and ear to swell.

Oxenhandler, in his quest for transcendence through French, altered his sexual identity: “I had my first homosexual experience with Michel at the University of Chicago in 1948. Meeting this brilliant teacher was the most exciting thing that happened in my years on a campus where politics, the arts, and the intellectual life were in ferment. I went to hear Michel read Rimbaud and came away hooked on French literature. Later, I took his courses. Under his look of a Scotch clergyman there was a subversive and seductive Socrates who understood the dreams of young men who left home to discover the world

of literature and the arts. Above all he held the key to France, to that wonderful culture I had briefly tasted as a GI; his knowledge of it seemed inexhaustible, and, to my amazement, he wanted to share it with me. There was a slight inconvenience in the fact that I did not measure up to his passion; but I was willing to make myself over, to become a gay man, if it meant that the treasures of French culture would be mine” (pp. 85–86).

Finally, Miller describes her summers at Middlebury, where she discovered the “fatal connection between French and sex (or at least French professors and American girls)” (p. 54). When complimented on the quality of her spoken French, she experiences a moment of *jouissance* : does she mean mere enjoyment or sexual pleasure? Undoubtedly, both.

It is not my claim that the transformative power of language is the primary motivation for language learners. However, as these excerpts illustrate, it is a powerful and seductive factor. In order to achieve their goal, these students—among them successful French scholars—believed implicitly in the native speaker construct. To deny our students the “privilege” of this belief, particularly at the beginning of their course of study, is not in our self interest. To relegate them to “the interstices of national languages and [...] the margins of monolingual speakers’ territories” (p. 368) is to arrogate a decision that ignores student motivation.

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