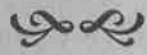

The Sociolinguistics of Foreign-Language Classrooms: Contributions of the Native, the Near-native, and the Non-native Speaker

Carl Blyth

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The Privilege of the Nonnative Speaker

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The study of foreign languages and literatures is predicated, explicitly or implicitly, on the notion of the native speaker. In language pedagogy, the premium put on spoken communicative competence since the 1970s has endowed native speakers with a prestige they did not necessarily have in the 1950s and 1960s, when the grammar-translation and then the audiolingual methods of language teaching prevailed; today foreign language students are expected to emulate the communicative skills of native speakers. Because American foreign language departments have always defined themselves against English departments by studying non-English languages and literatures (see Daniel and Peck 14), within the humanities native speakers of foreign tongues enjoy a de facto authority and prestige that the nonnative lacks. Literature students are usually assumed to be better readers of a foreign literature if they have a native command of its language; scholars specializing in their native languages often have an advantage on the job market over their nonnative colleagues. Foreign language study acquires credibility and legitimation from being backed by national communities of native speakers, who set the standards for the use of their national languages and often for the reading of their national literatures.

Despite the spread of postmodern thought in the humanities and in many branches of linguistics and anthropology (Duranti and Goodwin; Gumperz and Levinson), this idealization of the native speaker has not been put into question. But native speakers do not always speak according to the rules of their standard national languages; they display regional, occupational, generational, class-related ways of talking that render the notion of a unitary native speaker artificial. Moreover, whereas students can become competent in a new language, they can never become native speakers of it. Why should they disregard their unique multilingual perspective on the foreign lan-

guage and on its literature and culture to emulate the idealized monolingual native speaker? Such a question goes against the grain of received knowledge in foreign language study, because language has traditionally been seen as a standardized system, not as a social and cultural practice. Viewing language as a practice may lead to a rethinking of the subject position of foreign language learners and foreign readers of national literatures—in particular, to a discovery of how learners construct for themselves a linguistic and social identity that enables them to resolve the anomalies and contradictions they are likely to encounter when attempting to adopt someone else's language.

At a training seminar conducted in 1993 in Leipzig for teachers of French, German, and English from the United States, France, and Germany, a French participant suggested that her American and German colleagues use a 1992 advertisement from the Bon Marché Rive Gauche, and a fashionable Paris department store, to teach French in their countries.[1] Above an aristocratic-looking woman holding a credit card, a caption reads, "Rive Gauche, il existe encore des privilèges que nul ne souhaite abolir" 'On the Left Bank, there are still some privileges that no one wants to abolish.'[2] For any native speaker of French, the ad contains a clear allusion to the night of 4 August 1789, when the nobility abolished its birthrights on the altar of the Revolution. The ad even borrows the words that authors of French history textbooks typically use for the event: *l'abolition des privilèges*. In addition, the mention of the Left Bank of the Seine evokes for a French native speaker the demonstrations for social justice in May 1968 and other fights for civil rights. In this ad, however, birth privileges and civil rights have been replaced by the prerogative (Lat. *prœogare* 'to ask before another') of the credit card. The teacher who proposed the ad suggested that it be presented in class with a one-franc coin bearing the inscription *Liberté, égalité, fraternité,* in a juxtaposition illustrating how historical myth and historical reality can coexist in present-day France. Birth privileges, she said, might have been abolished in 1789, but today France still has a class system, and membership in the upper class can only be acquired through birth. Equality in the motto, inequality in the facts.

However, the nonnative teachers of French in the United States and Germany had different interpretations of what *privilèges* are. For the Americans, your privileges are defined simply by your credit line. Privileges have nothing to do with birth. They are the prerogatives that come with card-bearing membership in a community of consumers. By contrast, the West German colleagues rephrased the ad as an equal-opportunity issue: privileges, they said, are what you acquire through meritorious work, your just reward for your services in

a *Leistungsgesellschaft*, or performance-oriented society. If you can afford to buy things at the Bon Marchè, it is because you have served well and therefore "de-serve" them. Neither birth nor money but merit is the right basis of entitlement.

The interpretations of those American and West German readers were not wrong. All three meanings are potentially enclosed in the French ad. The Bon Marchè offers its customers the birth privileges of the elite by alluding to the night of 4 August; through the Bon Marchè credit card, it grants them the prerogatives of modern-day consumer–society members; and by evoking the Rive Gauche, it reminds them of the social rights gained through revolutions.[3] The polysemy of the ad allows it to be read and understood by multiple audiences, who may see in it what they please. What is interesting is not whether the nonnative speakers of French were right or wrong in giving readings of the ad that differed from those of educated native speakers but rather how the Americans and Germans differently positioned themselves in relation to the ad and to each other and how they thereby repositioned the ideal native reader. Moreover, French speakers resonate differently to the ad's multiplicity of meaning, according to their occupation, level of education, sex, ethnic origin, and age. A North African or a Portuguese immigrant living in France might not resonate to the glorification of French history in the ad and might not even feel addressed by the somewhat formal caption.

If the ad is used to teach French around the world, the diversity of potential readings will increase. Native and nonnative speakers will find in it different confirmations of their worldviews and different definitions of privilege, right, and prerogative. Familiar with the genre of the publicity poster, the American teachers at the Leipzig seminar felt that they understood this advertisement perfectly and that it was just another sales pitch for a piece of plastic. The East German teachers, by contrast, drew partly on the pre-1989 party-line cultural schemata of the GDR, which had inculcated such mottos as *Ich leiste was, ich leiste mir was* 'I produce, therefore I can afford to buy,' also on display in public places, and partly on early socialist revolutionary notions of equality as a humanitarian ideal. The party-line response led the East Germans to feel affinity with their West German counterparts, while the egalitarian reading aligned them with the French.

Given the multiplicity of possible readings of this ad, can one still speak of a canonical native speaker addressee? In the last ten years linguists have started to examine this construct critically, beginning with Thomas Paikeday in his 1985 book *The Native Speaker Is Dead!*[4] In interviews with Paikeday, over forty linguists, including Noam Chomsky, systematically scrutinize the usual definition of the native speaker of

a language as someone who has an intuitive sense of what is grammatical and ungrammatical in the language. Paikeday concludes that the " 'native speaker' in the linguist's sense of arbiter of grammaticality and acceptability of language . . . represents an ideal, a convenient fiction, or a shibboleth rather than a reality like Dick or Jane" (x). Because no publisher wanted to touch such a controversial book, Paikeday had to publish it himself, and linguists and educators circulated it under the table. For in language pedagogy the linguistic authority of the native speaker, derived from that of Chomsky's "ideal speaker-listener" (3), had been extended beyond grammar to include social behavior and cultural knowledge as well. Where would teachers and learners take their models from if there was no such thing as a native speaker? National identity was at stake, and so was the communicative approach to teaching foreign languages, which is based on the social and cultural authenticity of native nationals. Since 1985, however, the sociocultural turn in second-language-acquisition research and the growing number of multilingual, multicultural speakers around the world have continued to raise doubts about the validity of the native speaker model for foreign language study.

Originally, native speakership was viewed as an uncontroversial privilege of birth. Those who were born into a language were considered its native speakers, with grammatical intuitions that nonnative speakers did not have. For example, the ability to understand *nul . . . ne* in the Bon Marché ad as a negation, not a self-canceling double negative, would have been seen as requiring nativelike grammatical intuition. But such an ability alone does not let one pass for a native speaker. As Bourdieu remarks, "Social acceptability cannot be reduced to grammaticality alone" (43). The ad expects its readers to appreciate the rather uppity register of the caption, to find provocative the juxtaposition of a royalist initial *R* and the democratic typeface of the rest of the sentence, to recognize the allusions to the French Revolution—in short, to have been raised and educated in a certain French society. So it may be indeed that native speakers are made rather than born.

Defining native speakership as the result of a particular education transforms it from a privilege of birth to one of education. Education bestows the privilege of being not only a native speaker but a middle-class, mainstream native speaker. For native speakers have internalized the values, beliefs, myths of the dominant ideologies propagated by schools and other educational institutions. That's why native speakers with left-wing convictions, like the French teachers at this seminar, are sometimes ambivalent toward, even shocked by, the advertising in their societies. Nonnative speakers and native speakers who hold other political convictions might not have the same response.

But is this really so? An immigrant from Ivory Coast raised in France and educated in the French school system is likely to understand the social connotations of this ad perfectly well but might not be recognized as a native speaker of French. Native speakership, I suspect, is more than a privilege of birth or even of education. It is acceptance by the group that created the distinction between native and nonnative speakers.[5] The Belgian linguist René Coppieters, studying perceived differences in the competence of native and near-native speakers of French, concludes that "a speaker of French is someone who is *accepted as such by the community* referred to as that of French speakers, not someone who is endowed with a specific formal underlying linguistic system" (565). It is not enough to have intuitions about grammaticality and linguistic acceptability and to communicate fluently and with full competence; one must also be recognized as a native speaker by the relevant speech community.

The only speech community traditionally recognized by foreign language departments has been the middle-class, ethnically dominant male citizenry of nation-states, as Mary-Louise Pratt argues. The native speaker is in fact an imaginary construct—a canonically literate monolingual middle-class member of a largely fictional national community whose citizens share a belief in a common history and a common destiny, such as the belief reinforced by the Bon Marchè Rive Gauche ad. And this ideal corresponds less and less to reality.[6] Most people in the world belong to more than one discourse community, as François Grosjean remarks in *Life with Two Languages*. They know and use the languages of the home and of the school, of the coworkers and of the foreign spouse, of the immigrant colleague and of the foreign business partner, and pick up languages through travel, displacement, migration, upward and lateral mobility—so many registers, dialects, sociolects, styles, and codes, half mastered through practice, half inculcated through schooling, refracting one another in use, woven into dominant tongues, sowing seeds of interpersonal divergence or convergence, of social solidarity or dissidence. The view of the foreign language learner as a nicely bounded blank slate on which the language is inscribed, pattern drill after pattern drill, communicative exercise after communicative exercise, is a "linguistic utopia," to adopt Pratt's phrase, or a colonist's dream.

It has generally been assumed that the main motivation for learning a foreign language is to become one of "them." But 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. The pleasure of annexing a foreign language does not primarily

consist in identifying with flesh-and-blood native-speaking nationals. It derives rather from the unique personal experience of incarnating oneself in another, which our students know how to put into words, as this excerpt from the journal of a third-year Anglo-American woman student of German indicates.

> "Also" ist ein Wort ["*Also* is a word"], that I'd really love to use in English, but niemand versteht mich, wenn ich's nutze ["nobody would understand me if I used it"]. I suppose I could explain it to my friends, "Ja, also" ["Yeah, well"]. No I don't mean also as in "in addition to," nee, das wäre's nicht. Ich meine, tja, einfach "Also" . . . Allllso. Aber mit "Also" stürzt die Bedeutung sofort ab, senn ["No, that's not it. I mean, hm, simple *also* . . . *allllso*. But with *also* the meaning (of the word) collapses immediately if"] the person I'm talking to can't speak German. Iche meine, I think, die Bedeutung lebt in der Zunge, im Mund ["I mean, I think, the meaning resides in the tongue, in the mouth"], how can I explain this? The meaning of *also* lies in the way that the tongue reaches up for the roof of the mouth und dann bleibt's da, und die Bedeutung liegt darin, wie lange man die Zunge da oben lässt. Es ist ein besonderer Ton, "Allllso," im Vergleich mit" "Also" ["and then it stays there, and the meaning lies precisely in the length of time one keeps the tongue up there. It is a special sound, *allllso*, as contrasted with *also*"]. Which sounds more like Ah-so, which is what I thought it was after my first trip to Germany. Which is probably why the word was so wunderbar, nachdem ich's wirklich aussprechen konnte. Nachdem ich einen richtigen Grund dafür hatte. Also ["wonderful after I was able to pronounce it properly. After I had a real purpose for doing so. *Also*"].
>
> "Naja" ist natürlich ["*Naja* is of course"] an essay all unto itself. This is a word all languages need. And ich meine, nur ein Wort, das mit der Betonung alles erzählt ["I mean, it is a word that says it all in the way you say it"]. Naja. It's so much better than Oh well . . . oder ["or"], yeahhh. Naja. It has an identifiable start and end, da kannst du dich wirklich ausdrücken mit diesem Wort ["you can really express yourself with that word"].[7]

The code switching in this journal entry suggests the often untapped resources of language learners, who take intense physical pleasure in acquiring a language, thrill in trespassing someone else's territory, becoming a foreigner on their own turf, becoming both invisible and differently visible.[8] This student gives aesthetic, expressive value to words that are usually viewed as having a purely pragmatic, communicative function. Her pleasure comes not so much from the interactional payoff that the words might yield (e.g., by permitting her to hold

or take the floor) as from their ontological, subjective resonances. This nonnative speaker is slipping into someone else's place and feels enabled to express herself ("sich wirklich ausdrüken") from that position. Theatrical performance, ventriloquism, ritualization, stylization, heteroglossia, even glossolalia, come to mind—and only accessorily communicative efficiency.

Such a testimony seems to contradict Wittgenstein's claim that the limits of our language are the limits of our world (115). By appropriating the language of others, multilingual speakers create new discourse communities whose aerial existence monolingual speakers hardly suspect. Novelists and poets have often used language crossings to represent the subject positions of their characters or to configurate new realms of experience—for instance, by stereotyping foreign characters in novels. In Umberto Eco's *L'isola del giorno prima* (*The Island of the Day Before*), the German scientist Father Caspar exclaims:

> "Oh mein Gott, il Signore mi perdona che il Suo Santissimo Nome invano ho pronunziato. Im primis, ropo che Salomone il Tempio costruito aveva, aveva fatto una grosse flotte, come dice il Libro dei Re, e questa flotte arriva all'Isola di Ophir, da dove gli riportano (come dici tu?)...quadringenti un viginti..."
>
> "Quattrocentoventi." (235)
>
> *Oh mein Gott*, the Lord forgive I take His Most Holy Name in vain. *In primis*, after Solomon the Temple had constructed, he made a *grosse flotte*, as the Book of Kings says, and this *flotte* arrives at the Island of Ophir, from where they bring him—how do you say?—*quadringenti und viginti*."
>
> "Four hundred twenty."

Father Caspar is supposed to be a quintessential German scientist, his Italian replete with inverted verb constructions, stereotypical exclamations, and German and Latin words.

While the intrusion of one tongue into another serves in Eco's text to feature the oddity of foreignness, other novelists have used multilingualism to grant their characters a freedom of expression unavailable to monolingual speakers. A famous example is the nine-page alternation between German and French in the central chapter of Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*), where in the rarefied air of a Swiss sanatorium on carnival night, the German engineer Hans Castorp declares his love to the Russian émigré Clawdia Chauchat in French. After a particularly daring declaration by Castrop, rendered even more intimate by his use of the second-person singular pronoun—"J'aimerais beaucoup être portraitiste, moi aussi, pour avoir l'occasion d'étudier ta peau comme liu" 'I would very much

like to be a portrait painter too, to have the opportunity to study your skin as he does'—Madame Chauchat protests, "Parlez allemand, s'il vous plaît!" 'Speak German, please!,' accepting his use of French by replying in that language but insisting on the pronominal distance required by the social conventions of this German-speaking sanatorium. Castrop retorts, "Oh, ich spreche Deutsch, auch auf französisch . . ." 'Oh, I speak German even [when I speak] French,' and later he gives Madame Chauchat a justification of his use of French that every nonnative speaker would easily recognize:

> Avec toi je préfère cette langue à la mienne, car pour moi, parler français, c'est parler sans parler, en quelque manière—sans responsabilité, ou comme nous parlons en rêve. Tu comprends? (308–09)
>
> With you, I prefer this language to mine, because for me, to speak in French is to speak without speaking, in a sense—without responsibility, as we speak in a dream. Do you understand?

If Eco enlists a foreign language to mark a character's group or ethnic identity and Mann to give a character an alternative identity, poets sometimes use code switching to represent or symbolically evoke the fleeting intermingling of two incommensurable identities. Jean Giraudox's *Ondine*, written in 1939, the year war broke out between France and Germany, and adapted from a novel by the German Romantic writer Friedrich La Motte-Fouqué, features the love of the mermaid Ondine for a German aristocrat, Hans. It is said that during the dress rehearsal Giraudoux had to hold back his tears at the thought of another war between the two countries. His irreconcilable loves are expressed in a poem with alternating lines in French and German, recited by one of Ondine's sisters:

> Hans Wittenstein zu Wittenstein,
> Sans toi la vie est un trépas.
> Alles was ist dein ist mein.
> Aime-moi. Ne me quitte pas... (65)
>
> Hans Wittenstein zu Wittenstein,
> Without you life is death.
> All that is mine is yours.
> Love me. Do not leave me.

The poem attempts to hold back the march of history by having the French-speaking mermaid appropriate her German lover's language to express her love. The third line, which in German would normally read, "Alles, was dein ist, ist mein," has French syntax, and the octosyllabic French lines, through their proximity with the German, take

on the rhythm of German verse, the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. The emotional value of this language crossing is linked to the French playwright's position on the eve of World War II.

German acquires a different connotation at the close of World War I when T. S. Eliot juxtaposes it to English in *The Waste Land*:

> I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust.
> *Frisch weht der Wind*
> *Der Heimat zu.*
> *Mein irisch Kind,*
> *Wo weilest du?* (52)
>
> Cool blows the wind
> Homeward bound.
> My Irish child,
> Where is your home?

The German text, the opening lines of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, is not totally extraneous following the foreboding English passage. The prosodic features of English and German are carefully stitched together: voiceless consonants are echoed from one language to the other (dus*t*, Win*d*, Kin*d*), English voiceless *f* (*f*ear, hand*f*ul) is metamorphosed into German voiced *w* (*w*eht der *W*ind), the letter *i* is visually replicated in the two languages (str*i*ding, r*i*sing, fr*i*sch, W*i*nd, *i*r*i*sch, K*i*nd), the English sound *i* (str*i*ding, *ei*ther) is repeated in the German *ei* (H*ei*mat, w*ei*lest), the old trochaic rhythm of the German suggests a barcarole or lullaby after the more grandiloquent anapestic rhythm of the English—all these stylistic transgressions and prosodic transmutations form a tightly knit poetic tapestry. The pain evoked by one language (the fear of death in the memory of a war that pitted English speakers against German) is soothed by the other (in Tristan and Isolde's longing for love and death). The combination of the two codes expresses a tragic mixture of sweetness and sadness.

The richness of these uses of linguistic foreignness should provoke a rethinking of current language-teaching practices. Attempts have been made to expose students to the linguistic, social, and cultural diversity of those who claim to speak the same language—for example, Francophones in different parts of the world. But it is time to exploit the linguistic diversity that students bring to language learning. Without losing the benefits of communicative approaches in language pedagogy, teachers may want to validate once again the poetic function of language, the physical pleasure of memorizing and performing prose

and verse, of playing with language and writing multilingual poetry at the beginning of language instruction. In advanced study, teachers may want to legitimize once again exercises in translation and in comparative stylistics. Such attempts would enable learners not only to express others' linguistic and cultural meanings but to find new ways of expressing their own as well.

Users of tongues other than their own can reveal unexpected ways of dealing with the cross-cultural clashes they encounter as they migrate between languages. Their appropriation of foreign languages enables them to construct linguistic and cultural identities in the interstices of national languages and on the margins of monolingual speakers' territories. Seen from the perspective of linguistic travel and migration rather than from that of the traditional sedentary, bounded opposition native/nonnative, the notion of native speakership loses its power and significance. Far more interesting are the multiple possibilities for self-expression in language. In that regard, everyone is potentially, to a greater or lesser extent, a nonnative speaker, and that position is a privilege.

Notes

1. I describe this seminar in greater detail in "Dialogic Analysis."
2. All translations are mine.
3. This ad appeared in the Paris Métro as a poster with varying captions that all made the same ambiguous references to the pre-1789 aristocracy, to 1968 civil rights demonstrations, and to 1992 commercial practices and that thus constructed in the French cultural imagination a historical continuity between birth privileges and consumer prerogatives.
4. See also Quirk and Widdowson; Kachru; Davies. For some other attempts to problematize the notion of the native speaker in language teaching, see my "In Another Tongue," *Context*, "Stylistic Choice," and "Wem gehört die deutsche Sprache?"; Blyth; Rampton; Widdowson.
5. Speakers with nonstandard accents and speakers of local varieties of the standard language are placed below the top of the hierarchy of social acceptability. The arbitrary designation of native speakers can be seen anytime a national linguistic standard is artificially imposed on local varieties, as Parisian French was during the French Revolution. By eradicating the local dialects, or *patois*, and imposing the language of the Parisian bourgeoisie on the rest of the population, the revolutionary government constructed the notion of the French native speaker and bequeathed it to the rest of the world. As a saying variously attributed to Otto Jespersen and Max Weinreich goes, "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy."
6. Chomsky seems to conceive his "ideal speaker-listener" as a monolingual individual whose intuitions perfectly match the expectations of one homoge-

neous standard community. Such a standard community is increasingly difficult to find in multiethnic industrialized urban societies.

7. I am grateful to Julie Belz (Univ. of California, Berkeley) for allowing me to use this text, which she collected for her project Multilingual Texts in Advanced Language Study, under a grant from the Berkeley Language Center.

8. Autobiographers, novelists, poets, and psychoanalysts have vividly captured these experiences. See, for example, Kaplan; Canetti; Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud's diagnosis of Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.), qtd. in von Hoene. See also Sebbar and Huston, an insightful exchange of letters between two women writers "exiled" in the French language.

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