

Whose English is it?
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The phenomenon of languages having transnational or supranational profiles is not uncommon in the history of the world, and there shouldn't generally be any unusualness associated with it except when looked at from a predominantly European nation-state perspective, which unnecessarily identifies "linguicism" (see Phillipson 1992 p. 47) with nationalism. However, one cannot but feel that the current "glossography" of English in today's world is both qualitatively and quantitatively unprecedented. (By "Glossography," I mean the historical-structural and functional aspects of the global spread, status, role and entrenchment of a language.) I want to believe it is the global ubiquitousness of English and not any kind of ethnocentric self-importance that makes one of the editors of the O.E.D. say that "any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English" (Burchfield 1985, p. 160).

I chose this provocative and perhaps to some even somewhat controversial topic and title that will take me from Sociolinguistics through Applied Linguistics to Language Teaching for a special reason. I believe that the rapidly-changing sociolinguistic profile and glossography of English in today's world is influencing the political sociology of the language. New affiliations, affinities and loyalties involving the English language are developing in different parts of the world in such a manner as to create confusion in the ethno-cultural image and identity of the language. As the demography of the English speaking world changes, the ethnic dimension in the definition and identity of the speech community needs to be and is bound to be reevaluated. It also seems likely that a possible separation of language identity/loyalties from political-cultural ones by some speakers of English may disconcert or even threaten some others for whom the two loyalties are not necessarily separate or so markedly different, English being their primary mark of self-identity (see Simon 1980, for instance). A discussion of "Whose English is it," I believe, is inextricably tied in with one's perception of how to represent and view the English speaking communities in the world at large.

Attempts to describe or represent the current glossography of English in the world can perhaps be subsumed under two main umbrella models or paradigms: the much-(ab)used Native-Nonnative Model and the Continuum Model. The two need not necessarily be mutually opposed or exclusive, but often, in practice, the differences in

the various presuppositions and entailments between the two can result in apparent ideological confrontation. (See Tickoo 1991 for a polarized instance of this in the Quirk-Kachru controversy over "Liberation" versus "Deficit" Linguistics.)

The continuum model, developed mainly by sociolinguists, but now recognized by many applied linguists, cedes historical and lectal primacy to the kinds of English spoken in certain regions of the world, but treats these as the core varieties of the language from which peripheral variants spiral out in a continuum (See Kachru 1988, Smith 1981, Phillipson 1992). In this view some of the peripheral or outer variants have already achieved the status of independent varieties by successfully reconciling the separatist and participatory functions of their dialect variant(s) and hence need to be accorded the status that is due to any autonomous variety within a language. Any variant form is also believed to be potentially capable of achieving autonomy by meeting the necessary sociolinguistic criteria. Although the core varieties draw their status largely from ethno-political factors, these factors become irrelevant for the peripheral varieties. Each variety is seen as one that has often been indigenized or localized for the contrastive self-identity of the speakers. For this reason, this model often refers to World Englishes (in the plural) and uses terms like Old and New Varieties of English. The native-nonnative concept becomes irrelevant here as everyone is a native speaker of his particular variety of English and a non-native of all other varieties. And to the extent there is a core English that is an abstraction of all the varieties, everyone is considered a native speaker of that. The concept of ownership is also irrelevant since the answer to the question "whose English is it," will be either "Which one?" or "Why, everybody's, of course."

I grant there is some oversimplification here in the sense that many new varieties do still have a sense of insecurity in that they are still ambivalent and lack linguistic confidence even if they have consistency of norms. India, for instance, may still use the O.E.D. for some more time to come though it has long since stopped using the Oxford English Series! Thus Old varieties will generally retain some norm-providing role until the New varieties develop sufficiently strong armies and navies and technology behind them, if not dictionaries and grammars. (It is interesting to note that the U.S. thought of Britain as a de facto norm provider well into the twentieth century; Australia no longer thinks of Britain as the norm provider; and Singapore is slowly discovering its own English muscles.)

The Native-Nonnative Model was born and lives on the philosophical assumption that there is an animal that can be called "native speaker" for any and all of the living languages of the world, and that this animal can be identified through a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic defining features. This "unicorn

theory concept" ("We may not be able to show you a real unicorn, but we all know what it is!") assumed canonical reality when it got the support of Chomskyan linguistics, which relied heavily on "native-speaker intuition" for separating the grammatical from the non-grammatical. But as the linguistic imprecision and the Eurocentric unsoundness of the term is now becoming more and more obvious (see Paikeday 1985), its Applied Linguistic usefulness is also being questioned, particularly in the contexts of languages with complex, far-flung speech communities. The defining features of a native speaker could be any or all of the following in any combination, with different components assuming prominence according to exigencies and demands of the particular context.

- a) Primacy in order of acquisition
- b) Manner and environment of acquisition
- c) Acculturation by growing up in the speech community
- d) Phonological, linguistic and communicative competence
- e) Dominance, frequency and comfort of use
- f) Ethnicity
- g) Nationality/domicile
- h) Self-perception of linguistic identity
- i) Other-perception of linguistic membership and eligibility
- j) Monolinguality

Of all these, the last, being the monolingual speaker of a language, is the only single feature that guarantees unexceptional eligibility to native speakerdom on its own strength, as the person has no other language to be native of. But this is just another way of saying that in order to be a true native speaker of a language one has to be a monoglot and thus be linguistically deprived, compared to the majority of people in the world!

Although in theory it can be said that the more of these defining features one possesses, the more one becomes eligible for the native speaker status, in reality, in a lot of situations, ethno-political features have primacy over others. For instance, it is conceivable that one who fails criteria (a) to (e) above can still claim to be a native speaker and get acceptance if (s)he has Caucasian ethnicity and the "right" nationality.

Those who do not qualify (mostly by the ethno-political criteria) are dubbed non-native speakers regardless of their linguistic abilities. The traditional applied linguistic paradigm divides the non-natives into second and foreign language speakers/learners, with often little distinction between speakers and learners. This paradigm is still the basis on which decades of theory and practice of English language pedagogy and a multi-million dollar English language consumer industry, almost all developed in the two leading English-speaking nations on either side of the Atlantic, are built and made to thrive. In this native-

nonnative paradigm, there is no doubt or dispute about who owns English. The native speakers own it, but are willing to transfer controlled possession and award guided right of use to the non-native speakers, but may be forever unwilling to cede even a share of the ownership.

I do not wish a discussion of "whose English is it" to digress tangentially into a discussion of the legitimacy of the concept of the native speaker of English. But whose English is it in the sense of who has possession of it is different from whose is it in the sense of who it belongs to or owns it. I think it is the latter that is more contentious since ownership involves control and authority and hence power. The native-nonnative or ENL-ESL paradigms have created a power dynamic which forms the crux of the ownership issue. Whether "native speakers" own English or not, the dominant "Received Wisdom" of the Applied Linguistics industry certainly has not only gone about its business assuming that they do, but also has actively promoted and perpetuated the belief as a scientific fact (see Maley 1991).

They have apportioned to themselves the rights and responsibilities not only of controlling the forms and norms of English globally but also of dominating the theory and practice of its teaching and research. Generations of Applied Linguistic myth-making in the indubitable superiority and the impregnable infallibility of the "native speaker" has created stereotypes that die hard. Native speakers are not only ipso facto knowledgeable, correct and infallible in their competence but also ipso facto make the best and most desirable teachers, experts and trainers. (Applications are invited from native speakers of English...!) A non-native speaker is a cognitively deficient, socio-pragmatically ungraceful klutz at worst and a language-deprived error-prone wretch at best, who might, at times, reach "near-native" competence but whose intuitions are nevertheless suspect and whose competence is unreliable. As Nelson (1985) correctly says, the power and persuasiveness of a text can be pre-determined by the reader's perception of the "nativeness" of the author even before the reading has begun. If there are linguistic deviances in it, whether those are "read" as errors arising from incompetence or as mistakes of performance depends on whether we perceive the writer as native or non-native. A native speaker "owns" the language and so has the power to err without a blemish on his competence. In an experiment that I conducted some time ago I found that many instances of stylistic and idiomatic oddities that I had deliberately introduced in a piece of writing were noted and corrected by unknown "referee" readers, but exactly similar "errors" were untouched when I used an Anglo-Saxon-sounding pseudonym! I was recently sent a piece of writing to look at and in my report I suggested some possible minor stylistic and compositional improvements in what I thought was a well-written

piece and I was surprised (or was I really?) to see that the editor

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who sent it to me unhesitatingly attributed the "errors" to the fact that the author was a non-native speaker! Obviously, the fault lay with the author, not with the writing! Sociolinguists have long pointed out our tendencies to evaluate people through their language, but applied linguists haven't yet woken up to our tendency to evaluate the language through the people.

Linguistic and communicative competence of all English speakers is evaluated, often incorrectly, in terms of the so-called native speaker norms (see Nayar 1989, Platt and Weber 1984), and even Second Language Acquisition theories (Krashen 1982, Schumann 1978) are based on observations of English learning in "native speaking" countries. Phillipson (1992) has shown how the institutionalized English teaching industry, dominated by "native speaker" countries, has created commodities called ESL and EFL for the disempowerment of other English speakers and how a reified myth of the "native speaker" has enabled some (native) English speakers to turn the English language and English teaching into a bigger weapon than Star Wars, and the English teaching industry into a cornerstone of the global capitalist system.

So then, whose English is it? The facts point in only one direction. Decades of tradition in the Received Wisdom of Applied Linguistics, the theory and practice of English language pedagogy, the entire philosophical underpinnings of the global ESL EFL industry, the political, economic and technological muscle of the largely monoglot traditional English-speaking countries, the existence and continued "popularity" of quasi-diplomatic organisations like the British Council and the USIA, all say that the English language, at least correct, good and authentic English language really belongs to the native speakers (in effect Britain and the U.S. and perhaps also those they deign to designate as co-owners). From the most fanatical of the "Pratorian Guards" (See Prator 1968) to the most liberal of Applied Linguists (see, for instance, Strevens 1982) few can escape taking the "us-and them" attitude when talking about English speakers and users in the world and I have seen the bogey of the native speaker invoked countless times on the TESL-L network in the last couple of years.

But then I think the question we should now ask is not "whose English is it," but "whose English should it be?". My own view is that in the context of the glossography of English in today's world, the native-nonnative paradigm and its implicational exclusivity of ownership is not only linguistically unsound and pedagogically irrelevant but also politically pernicious, as at best it is linguistic elitism and at worst it is an instrument of linguistic imperialism. English is being learned and used by millions of people in many parts of the world with no intention or

opportunity in their lives of ever directly communicating with a so-called native speaker, and this fact alone shouldn't make their code in any way inferior. As Smith (1983, p. 1) says: "English

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belongs to any country which uses it, and may have as wide or as limited a use (either as an international or auxiliary language) as is felt desirable.' And Strevens (1982, pp. 427-8), despite his us-and-them attitude, strikes the right note when he says:

"Whose language is it?" is to suggest that the question itself embodies unreal values. It implies that some merit accrues to us because we 'possess' in some unique sense, the English language. As we have seen this is not true. But it is undoubtedly true that we acquire great benefits from being as it were co-possessors, with seven hundred million others of the English language. Whose language is it? It is ours and everyone's: the English language is truly a world possession.

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Whose English Is It? -- RESPONSE #1

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RESPONSE #1:

P. B. Nayar brings up an important issue in his article "Whose English Is It?" Many of us in the TESL/TEFL field tend to think of ourselves as "liberals" regarding who "owns" English--of course, everyone does. However, at the same time, it is embarrassing to admit that we do fall into the trap of making the type of native/nonnative speaker distinction to which Nayar refers. This means that even those of us who think we are free from "linguistic

elitism," as defined by Nayar, can find ourselves unknowingly caught in its web. Nayar's article addresses everyone.

However, I think that Nayar perhaps goes too far when he suggests that "[a] nonnative speaker is [stereotypically thought to be] a cognitively-deficient, socio-pragmatically ungraceful klutz at worst and a language-deprived error-prone wretch at best...." This dichotomy as overgeneralized, if not erroneous. We know that people who are multi-lingual are more cognitively advanced than those who are monolingual. That is, they are better problem-solvers because they gain multiple perspectives on the problem. Even if we limit native-speakerdom to only monolinguals, who Nayar says are the only people who can definitely be categorized as native speakers, since they have no other native language, I doubt that all monolinguals can be divided into these two camps or fall along a continuum between these two camps in terms of how they view nonnative speakers, assuming that "native/nonnative" is the distinction made. Nayar may feel that he needs to slap his readers in order to make them wake up and recognize the political situation, but it is my fear that he may turn some readers off. This is an issue that is too important not to reach everyone.

Nayar says that the Continuum Model and the Native/Nonnative Speaker Model do not need to be mutually exclusive, but that the differences in what they are based on may cause ideological confrontation. It is clear from his descriptions, however, that he sees the Continuum Model as more pleasing, as one might think we all would.

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RESPONSE #2:

However painful it is for me as a (bilingual) native speaker of English who has taught in Europe for over 25 years and who, at least in the German university system, has practically no "power" _other_ than that associated with being a native speaker, I have to admit that P.B. Nayar is right about a lot of things. He is right about the EFL teaching industry and about EFL textbook production, right about teaching methods, and right in pointing a finger at the shameful assumption that native speakers don't need the experience of learning a foreign language to be able to teach ESL/EFL well.

Nayar rightly recognizes and addresses the issue of power. Yes, there is an imperialistic aspect to the way in which English is disseminated, learned, accepted and standardized. In fact, the

only relative "power" I have in this system is derived from the fact that I am a native speaker; it is the only area in which anybody bows to my "wisdom." Yet ironically, even this power is less claimed or asserted by me than it is temporarily invested in me by institutional structures which determine hierarchies at German universities. That this is so is made clear by the firm belief (codified in state hiring regulations for university language teachers) that once a native speaker has lived and taught here for a certain number of years, s/he is considered to have become "assimilated" and thus no longer "native" enough to teach English at a German university. Whether this attitude was born here or merely took root when it became fashionable to import native speakers, German English departments are too conservative to easily extend standards beyond what has been traditionally accepted. In some parts of Germany, the "native British English" standard has only relatively recently been broadened to include "native American English." Since the system is grounded in a sense of its own exclusivity, it is only natural that a sense of inclusiveness -- which would allow the acceptance of Indian English, Singaporean English or, for that matter, speakers of English who look "different" -- will be much slower to develop.

Still, as I read Nayar's comments, I couldn't help thinking of a language teaching conference I attended last summer. We were a group of francophone and anglophone native speakers (from the core anglophone areas Nayar talks about), and the anglophones among us spent most of an afternoon discussing what we would consider correct -- not arguing over authority, as might have been the case ten or fifteen years ago, but rather enriching each other's knowledge by talking about what each of us would accept. Afterward, when we met the francophone teachers, they were surprised to hear about our experience; for them there would have been absolutely no question or discussion about what was acceptable. I was struck by the linguistic impoverishment of such a monolithic standard.

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The English language itself is so much larger, so much more complex, so much greater than any one speaker, that we can only learn from other speakers. The point shouldn't be so much whether a person has been born in this or that country or whether he or she is monolingual, or belongs to a particular ethnic group, but whether s/he is willing to make a long-term commitment to the language. When this kind of commitment to the language becomes the measure, it becomes clear that the native speaker who makes no effort to improve, who rests on his/her native speaker laurels, who stagnates in the sluggish waters of native-speakerdom does more harm to the language and to language teaching than the one who dedicates him/herself to the language for 25 years -- whatever the country or culture of his or her origin. Think of the so-called "non-native" speakers of English who contribute to the richness of

the English literary tradition and who do so in part by not being bound by all the conventions that "native" speakers internalize from childhood: Derek Walcott, Joseph Conrad, Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, to name a few.

Think, too, how much more motivated, more enfranchised, and more empowered our students might feel if they thought they had a bona fide stake in the life of the language, if, rather than discouraging playfulness and experimentation and correcting their essays "down" to conventionality and standards of correctness, we spent more time helping them develop a sense of what "works" and what doesn't.

Doing so will bring us closer to the reality of an internationalized English which is much larger than any one of us can comprehend. It will also help us see that the language does not "belong" to any of us or even, finally, to all of us -- but that we belong to the language, and that each of us has "rights" to the language commensurate with our commitment to it.

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