

Native Speaker

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Short version

Human beings, languagers, categorize each other with respect to the “languages”, i.e. sociocultural constructions of sets of linguistic features, they speak. One such category is that of “native speaker” of a given language. Being categorized as a native speaker of a given language entails certain rights on behalf of the “native” speaker, i.e. the right to call the language “my language”. It also gives the speaker the right to know what is “correct” in the language, i.e. correctness is a social and not a linguistic phenomenon. Furthermore, the categorization of people as “native speakers” is negotiable and situationally contingent. For instance, in superdiversity we can observe a misfit between people’s sense of inheritance of, affiliation to, and competence in their language or languages.

Long version

Human beings position each other in relation to “languages”, i.e. abstract notions of grouped linguistic features constructed as and recognized to be “a language” (see *linguaging*). Terms like “Greenlandic mother tongue speaker” and “learner of English as second language” are such associations of people to “languages” with respect to assumed ownership, competence, and heritage. In other words social categorizations of speakers involve stereotypes about their relationship to specific “languages”. In some cases this relationship is (comparatively stable and) described with the term “native speaker”. In this way (among other ways) concepts and terms of individual “languages” make sense as having relationships with individuals. People are socially positioned according to the languages they are assumed to speak, the languages they are assumed not to speak, and according to how, when and where they are assumed to have learned the languages they “know”.

A “native speaker” is accepted by (some) other speakers as being allowed to claim a number of rights with respect to the “language” of which she or he is a “native”. The “native speaker” of “a language” can claim to have “access” to that language, to have “ownership” of the language. He or she can claim legitimacy in the use of the language and can claim that the language “belongs” to her or him and can call it “my language”.

In varying degrees, *non-native* speakers can claim “access”, “competence”, “legitimacy”, etc., depending on the acceptance by others of their “having learned” or “acquired” the language. Such acceptance may be authoritative as happens through language proficiency exams (think of the language testing industry with IELTS and TOEFL as well known examples), but the acceptance may also be informally negotiated depending on the context.

Leung, Harris, and Rampton (1997: 555-6) suggest that the traditional concept of “native speaker” has been used with three relevant, but different perspectives, and that these perspectives substitute both the concept (*der Begriff*) and the term (*das Wort*). They suggest a “language expertise” perspective, i.e. people’s “ability in each of the posited languages”, a

“language affiliation” perspective, i.e. people's “sense of affiliation to any of the languages allegedly within their repertoire” and a “language inheritance” perspective, i.e. people's inherited belonging to one or more languages through birth and ancestry. They warn that membership in an ethnic group does not mean an automatic language inheritance: especially in the context of increased migration and mobility (see *superdiversity*) relations between language expertise, language affiliation and language inheritance cannot be taken for granted. In situations of language shift for instance, speakers may indeed “inherit” a language in the sense that they think of the language as “their” language while at the same time they may regret that they (or their children) do not know their language very well (cf. Harris 2006).

Kroon (2003) has proposed a similar distinction with respect to uses of the notion “mother tongue” and “mother tongue education”. He distinguishes a socializational concept of MT that is synonymous with home language: “the language that is used by a child's first carers in the home”, a politico-cultural concept of MT that is “closely related to national or regional identity formation or state formation”, and an educational concept of mother tongue that emphasizes mastery of the language through education.

So, regardless of what perspective we choose, we find that the relationship between an individual and a language is a sociocultural construction. It is negotiable, and it may become the object of political power struggles. To give just one example: In Denmark for instance, Social Democrat vice chairperson Lene Jensen has said that “If one is born and raised in Denmark and intends to stay here, then one's mother tongue is Danish” (speech, 13 September 2001) Thereby she has constructed tens of thousands of people as “native speakers of Danish” who do not see themselves that way, and who would not traditionally be seen as such.

A consequence of this view of the association between “languages” and individuals is that there is no such thing as inherently correct language. Correctness is a social convention about the characteristics of specific linguistic features. Correctness has nothing to do with the *linguistic* characteristics of features - correctness is ascribed to the features used by (some) speakers (e.g., newsreaders, teachers, old men). The notion of “correct language” indexes specific features in (at least) two different ways. A feature may be “correct” when it is used in the way it is used by “native” speakers of the given language under most circumstances. When used differently, the feature is by social convention “incorrect” and marks non-belonging or incompetence. The other widely assumed meaning of “incorrect” is that it denotes a use of a feature which violates “the rules of the language”. The assumption is based on the notion of languages as bounded and fixed packages comprising certain features and excluding all others. When it comes to concrete features, the features which are specifically associated with speakers of low education or low socioeconomic status (or non-natives) are typically considered “incorrect”.

References

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