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Of names and norms

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Of names and norms

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Disciplinary expertise, in linguistics and generally, must of its very nature be an abstraction at a remove from actual experience. Thus sociolinguists generally agree that any idea of clearly demarcated, unified, countable 'languages' (whether native, of origin, second or foreign) or 'varieties' is a convenient fiction, and therefore also the idea of 'native' (or other) speakers (see also Busch, this volume). But the traditional linguistic concepts have remained in use and are all-pervasive - "notions like 'native speaker', 'mother tongue' and 'ethnolinguistic group' have considerable ideological force" (Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 6). This is understandable because we grow up acquiring and using the named language/s of our primary community, a process that is intricately bound up with our individual and social identity and even a sense of linguistic ownership. Although languages, dynamically adaptable as they are, take on different communal allegiances over time, the general assumption remains that they are essentially defined by the norms of usage of the communities in which they originated, whose members acquire them as a 'mother tongue' in the process of primary socialization. Thus also in the case of English, "the most pluricentric and international of all languages" (Clyne 2006: 99), while it is recognised that there are different communities of native speakers, the assumption remains

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that the language is of its very essence communal and its use must therefore necessarily be a matter of conforming to the communal norms that inform the behaviour of its native speakers.

For native speakers, whether primarily socialised into ‘one’ or ‘more’ languages, language and community are inseparably intertwined, and the terms ‘mother tongue’ and ‘native speaker’ refer to concepts which, while virtually impossible to define in linguistic terms, represent socio-psychological realities. They are names for what the ethnomethodologists refer to as ‘membership categories’ (e.g. Sacks 1972, Hester & Eglin 1997). As members of their community, native speakers adopt ‘ways of speaking’ (Hymes 1974) and norms of usage that are suited to their communal communicative needs and purposes and are at the same time expressive of their communal identity. To represent the use and learning of a language by non-member outsiders as a matter of conforming to these norms is to assume that they have the same communicative needs and are required to adopt the same social identity. This, of course, is where problematic ideological implications arise – implications of coercive conformity, of linguistic imperialism indeed (see Widdowson 2021).

These issues have become particularly prominent and urgent in the era of globalization, with its greatly increased volume of lingua franca communication (with ‘English’ as a lingua franca, ELF, as the globally dominant lingua franca among many) and of research into this phenomenon over recent years. ELF communication takes place not *within* a speech community but *across* speech communities – that is the whole point of making use of a lingua franca. This mode of communication brings speakers from different linguacultural backgrounds into contact and so requires them to suspend and transcend the familiar communal norms they usually rely upon. In the contemporary digitalised, globalised world relatively stable communities have become disrupted and dispersed and social identities accordingly adaptively redefined. What happens in these contexts challenges all well-entrenched conventional concepts of e.g. speech community membership, speaker legitimacy, competence and acceptability.

This inter- or trans- communal communication and the re-socialization it necessarily involves calls for a reconceptualization whereby language is dissociated from its particular established communal norms and seen instead as an evolving communicative resource (see Pitzl 2018). However, these necessary conceptual adjustments do not come naturally to the participants in lingua franca exchanges, who often proceed according to their customary expectations. What makes conceptual adjustments particularly difficult – to mention an example that impinges on all contemporary language learners and users – is that these traditional concepts are institutionally endorsed by no less an authority than the Council of Europe. Thus in the (now globally used) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the benchmark for the specification of stages of language proficiency is essentially that of the communal native speaker norm. It is true that in its revised version the term 'native speaker' has been replaced throughout by other terms, as e.g. in the following B2 level descriptor – with the corrections marked in red (but here in italics) in the 2018 Provisional Edition:

> Can sustain relationships with *speakers of the target language* ~~*native speakers*~~ without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with another ~~*native*~~ *proficient* speaker.

The reason given for the removing of 'native speaker' is "because this term has become controversial" (Council of Europe 2020:24). It is obvious that the change is merely cosmetic and the concept remains the same. It may be referred to with more acceptable, politically correct names, but the norms of reference are unchanged.

The persistence of this normative view of language as necessarily communal rather than as an open-access communicative resource has the effect of denying the legitimacy of the lingua franca use of the resources of any named language, and the consequence of this is of particular significance in the case of English because it is so globally pervasive. The conceptual adjustments I have referred to have an immediate practical urgency in unequal high-stakes encounters, where there is a unilateral (im)position of power, and the use of ELF, or the way it is conceived, can result in misunderstanding, alienation, inequity, and disenfranchisement and be conflictual in its consequences. Such high-stakes encounters and activities include procedures pertaining to immigration and asylum seeking, diplomacy, peace keeping and war mongering, language (education) policy (incl. the CEFR) and language planning, testing, international publishing, and even interpreting (see e.g. Seidlhofer 2020). The distinction between names and norms is not just a terminological matter of academic interest but raises fundamental applied linguistic issues about how language is actually used to enact communication and mediate relationships between people in a globalised world.

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