The term 'Native Speaker': Myth or Reality? Acceptable or Problematic?

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1 Abstract

In this paper, the core question *"is the concept of Native Speaker a myth or a reality?"* tends to be answered through analyzing pervious scholars' proposed criteria towards the definition. Specifically, these would discuss why the term 'Native Speaker' fails to be defined, variations of interpretation from different perspectives of Applied Linguistics, and how the stereotype towards this term influences peoples' lives in reality. Through viewing the purposes and applications on current debates towards defining 'Native Speaker', this article tends to convey the idea that the term 'Native Speaker' should not be totally accepted or abandoned, as the reality of 'Native Speaker' varies in definition across different linguistic areas. Still, it is necessary to be cautious about setting clear boundaries when utilizing this concept to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding.

2 Introduction

According to Davies (2004), the debate on concept 'Native Speaker' (NS) seemed to start when Chomsky firstly proposed the status of native speaker through a theoretical linguistic perspective: Being a native speaker is regarded as the ultimate achievement of the language aspect of human development and everyone must be a native speaker of a specific language. While the problem is that this statement ideally views language as an entity without considering any variations or special proficiency levels. Based on this case, people in reality who share 'native speaker' identity of a language have different perceptions towards their language competence. Besides, social factors such as migration, colonization, or even globalization could result in a loss of native speaker identity. Language development is a complex, dynamic and socially influenced process, but not fixed and changeless.

For the reasons discussed above, the ambiguous concept 'native speaker' has been constantly read with various explanations. A few scholars noticed its problematic utilization and managed to raise new concepts to replace the term, as well as to prevent applying 'Native Speaker' status to current academic literature (Dewaele, 2018; O'Rourke & Pujolar, 2013). Before discussing these, it is essential to clarify how scholars currently define the term 'Native Speaker' and its antonym 'Non-Native Speaker' through different views, and to separate myth from reality.

3 'Native Speaker' and 'Non-Native Speaker'

Even though the term 'Native Speaker' has been commonly used in different areas, its appropriateness and functions of usage have remained up for debate by scholars. Firstly, the appropriateness of this term depends on how it should be defined. Variations of its definition have been raised through different perspectives. For example, Chomsky, as a representative of theoretical linguists, tended to legitimize the concept in the way that native speaker should be the only valid speaker of a language. Specifically, it requires that a native speaker should naturally acquire all idealized linguistic features and competences within a completely homogeneous community. Nevertheless, a few scholars specializing in the field of ELT (English language teaching) and TESOL (Teaching English to the speakers of other languages) totally objected to Chomsky's proposal on 'Native Speaker', as it never took the reality of language usage into consideration and caused the potential problem of forming a stereotype towards language teaching that only native speakers could be an ideal language teacher (Llurda, 2016; Mahboob, 2005). Similarly, Davies (2004) also pointed out a phenomenon that a group of people who were supposed to meet the qualification rejected to view themselves as native speakers by following the Chomskian paradigm. This indicates that if Chomsky's ideas were approved, the concept of 'Native Speaker' would make its existence meaningless and be merely referred in literature, as few people are able to actually attain the highest proficiency level of a language, even it is their first language.

Additionally, other scholars tend to be conservative when setting boundaries and listing possible criteria to define this concept instead of making a complete statement. For example, Dewaele (2018) once agreed on Cook's (1999) argument that it is inevitable to mention the language firstly spoken by someone in their life when clarifying on the definition of native speaker. This is the crucial element for a person to be viewed as a native speaker, regardless of the possibility that first language would be lost in their later life (Schmid, 2011). Particularly, Davies (2004) raised an idea: to be a native speaker means not being a non-native speaker - and came up with six criteria summarized by common agreements on defining 'Native Speaker': FLA (First Language Acquisition) in childhood, intuitions on standard norms and idiomatic expressions, as well as the capabilities of discourse and pragmatic control, creating L1 performance, and interpretations into L1. In this respect, Davies's Davies (2004) intention seems not to normalize the general understanding towards 'Native Speaker' but to exclude those without qualifications from being defined as native speakers so as to narrow down the margins of a potential grouping. However, this idea brings another problem by eliciting the opposite term of 'Non-Native Speaker'.

'Non-Native Speaker' is also a controversial concept alongside 'Native Speaker'. It was initially proposed to refer to the rest of people who do not share the identity of 'Native Speaker' (Dewaele, 2018). However, this definition itself shows an implicit bias of dividing people into different categories and conveys a problematic 'mutual understanding' that native speakers always acquire a specific language better than non-native speakers. In other words, somebody would never attain the native-like language proficiency level or should be regarded as an unqualified language user as long as he or she does cannot be identified as a native speaker of that specific language. Dewaele (2018) once pointed out the flaw of the concept of 'Non-Native

Speaker' by making an analogy on a group of 'blue-eyed people' and claimed that people never define them as 'not green-eyed people', as it is known to all that there is no superiority and inferiority among colors and each of them is clearly described and nominated a unique name through its special properties. This is the goal that current scholars try to achieve when considering the problem of defining 'Native Speaker' and 'Non-Native Speaker' (Dewaele, 2018; Llurda, 2016; O'Rourke & Pujolar, 2013).

Above all, we can conclude that there still remains many doubts when defining the concepts 'Native Speaker' and 'Non-Native Speaker', and that there are many difficulties regarding how to rephrase the antonym of 'Native Speaker' due to its ambiguity. In particular, the following discussions will be extended to analyze whether the problematic concept should be reserved or abandoned, whether and how SLA (Second Language Acquisition) learners could achieve native-like proficiency, and to explore innovative ideas proposed to replace the concept of a 'Native Speaker'. Before that, it is necessary to elaborate on the core question of this paper as well as to clarify which properties of a 'Native Speaker' are myths, and which are based on reality.

4   Myth and reality: Different angles to look at 'Native Speaker'

To address the core question 'Is the concept of native speaker a myth or a reality', it is obvious that scholars in previous studies tend to skip the debate and directly elaborate on these two properties by prior agreement that 'Native Speaker' (NS) is both a myth and a reality. However, Davies (2003) once made a clarification on 'myth' and 'reality': the myth refers to mysterious, unqualified and doubtful properties of 'Native Speaker' when it is regarded as an abstract and universal theory, whereas the reality presents marginal and specific features when the concept of 'Native Speaker' is placed into discussions with particular social and contextual factors. Likewise, Dewaele (2018) rephrased the myth of NS as 'mystical property' in his previous study and elaborated that the property was due to the 'dynamic and ambiguous' features of the concept of NS.

Another explanation was given by Han (2004) who followed Davies' study on viewing the myth and reality of NS concepts respectively through different perspectives: the concept of 'Native Speaker' in sociolinguistics represents a concrete thing such as identity, powerful authority, or even a presence of language confidence. However, from the perspective of psycholinguistics, the concept is intangible like an icon.

To conclude, there is no doubt that the concept of 'Native Speaker' acquires both properties. But to determine whether it is a myth or reality depends on the angle of one's approach: 'Native Speaker' is a myth when the discussion of this concept is based on the premise of viewing it as a general linguistic idea, such as the discussion of legitimizing the standards of NS. 'Native Speaker' could also be a reality when being applied to discussions on specific sociolinguistic contexts. For instance, it refers to a reality when NS is discussed as an identity that SLA leaners could aim to be.

5   Could SLA learners be able to achieve native-like language proficiency?

Speaking of the current debates on NS concepts, one of the hottest topics is whether SLA learners could attain the same language proficiency level as native speakers. Based on Chomsky's theory discussed above, the existence of NS provides an idealized language model. In this case, it indicates that perfect language attainment would never be successfully pursued by learners. Mahboob (2005) once agreed on the argument and elaborated on her point of view through TESOL perspective by eliciting two concepts as supporting evidences: fossilization and interlanguage. Specifically, interlanguage was firstly raised by Selinker (1969) to describe the outputs produced by learners' creation on foreign norms of the target language during the learning process. In other words, these productions could also be regarded as errors judged by standard norms of that specific language. Fossilization conveys an idea that once learners acquire enough knowledge and competencies of their target languages, the learning process would halt. These two concepts imply a common idea that a gap would always exist between learners and native speakers.

However, Cook (1999) objected to this argument and pointed out that since language development is constant, dynamic and endless, NS could never be the ultimate achievement for learners. Boyle (1997) quoted Davies' argument to indicate a possibility that SLA learners might achieve native-like proficiency level as well as communicative and linguistic competences. Specifically, Davies (2004) claimed this argument through analyzing his six criteria proposed to define NS concept: all these criteria except the early childhood acquisition could be attained by SLA learners with sufficient practices and contact with target language speakers. This was already proved in Coppieters' Coppieters (1987) previous study on differences between native speakers and advanced learners of French, which showed that a significant factor preventing the learners' proficiency was the learners' lower generalizing capacity, a result of the lack of early acquisition.

Therefore, although SLA learners might be restricted by factors such as the effect of fossilization and interlanguage to achieve native-like proficiency, it is still possible if enough efforts were put on target language learning.

6   Should the term 'Native Speaker' be rejected or accepted?

Compared with previous debates discussed above, the following debate on the extended use of 'Native Speaker' is reflected by a series of realistic problems. Here follows one typical example of job crisis as a result of the prejudice posed by NS and NNS:

Mahboob (2005) once stated a phenomenon discussed in her previous study that nowadays a large number of non-native speakers fail to become employed as teachers of their specialization languages due to the lack of 'Native Speaker' identity (Mahboob, 2005). Even worse, the situation still happened on the premise that both the native speaker and non-native speaker had similar proficiency of that target language. She mentioned, as a result of her study, that more and more program administrators view 'Native Speaker' as an important criterion of judging a teacher's language capability (Mahboob, 2005). In other words, when comparing with na-

tive speakers, non-native speakers of a language have no advantages in the competition for employment no matter how advanced their language skills and how abundant teaching experiences they acquire. Therefore, some scholars began to reflect on this job crisis by reviewing the concept of NS and considered eradicating the discrimination by calling for a stop on the utilisation of the term 'Native Speaker' Dewaele (2018), Llurda (2016), and Mahboob (2005).

However, although the concept of NS has already come under attack, other scholars noticed that it is still widely used by a large amount of people (Llurda, 2009). From my perspective, it is unattainable to force people to abandon this concept, no matter mentally or practically. But it is necessary to announce the flaws of NS concepts to and find solutions on advertising the advantages of NNS so as to increase its status. Specifically, Boyle (1997) once made positive comments on NNS as a language teacher in previous research which might give a clue for solving the job crisis problem: on one hand, as bilinguals or multilinguals, non-native speaker teachers should get more familiar with students' culture and native language to deal with anticipated teaching problems; on the other hand, non-native speaker teachers usually acquire professional pedagogical trainings and tend to perform better those native speakers who acquire higher language proficiency but less qualifications in teaching.

7   New deveopments in redefining 'Native Speaker'

Since the concept 'Native Speaker' to some extent has been rejected, a series of new ideas to replace the term 'Native Speaker' have been innovated to avoid potential problems caused by the myth of NS. For instance, O'Rourke and Pujolar (2013) introduced a new term of 'new speaker' to represent those people outside the NS group through language revitalization perspectives. Dewaele (2018) came up with another idea called 'LX user', aiming at generalizing variations of language users. Through his explanation, 'LX' label presents a neutral value and could refer to any foreign language acquired by learners at any proficiency level and any stages of learning. Besides, 'user' is a general statement of including all types of people who utilize a language either with a specific skill or comprehensively. In my opinion, Dewaele's proposal is smart enough to make up the shortcomings of NS concepts, but still relies on people making a common agreement on the definitnon of 'X': some might rank based on the processes of language acquisition, while others might view the ranking as a proficiency scale.

Apart from new innovations, other existing terms have also been raised to deal with the issue of identifying all users of English, such as WEs (World Englishes) and ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) so as to prevent the elicitation of 'Native Speaker' in further rigid literatures (Llurda, 2016). WE refers to any English varieties and ELF stands for English communications existing between people who share English as their common language. These two concepts are established based on viewing English as a global language, which delegitimizes the status of standard English and views all variations of the English language equally. In that case, I suggest a formula of naming: nationality + target language + user'. For example, a Chinese person who learns English as their target language would be nominated as 'Chinese English user'.

8   Conclusion and further direction

This paper identified possible criteria established to define the concept of Native Speaker from different linguistic perspectives, addressed the core problem through the elaboration on two properties of NS (myth and reality), analyzed the current debates on NS relevant issues arising from realistic problems, and introduced new ideas proposed to replace the term of NS. Through all sections discussed above, it is essential to notice that whether or not NS concepts are myth or reality depends on the linguistic aspect through which it is viewed and the context in which it is placed to be discussed. Besides, there is no doubt that a series of potential problems such as class divisions and stereotypes arise from actual implementations of the ambiguous concept. In the future, it is more applicable to consider other solutions to fix the flaws of NS concepts instead of rejecting to use it, as it is hard to destroy its status over many years of its usage, and would discredit many linguistic innovations which have used this concept.

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