

ADVERSE ‘NATIVE SPEAKER’ EFFECTS ON ANGLOPHONES IN THE MULTILINGUAL WORKPLACE

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Abstract

In order to explore the social effects of the differentiation between ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ varieties of English, the present qualitative study followed six Anglophone trainees in an EU institution in Luxembourg. Data were gathered in 2018/19 and 2020/21, combining on-site observations with longitudinal and one-off interviews. Research incited participants’ reflections on language practices at work and mapped their discursive positioning. Conclusions drawn from a sociolinguistic analysis of stances show that, despite the vagueness and lack of clearly definable linguistic characteristics for the category, being labelled as ‘native English’ brought distinct negative effects to the experience of the ‘native English’ participants. The contribution highlights the social constructivist character of the native/non-native dichotomy and draws attention to its adverse effects in the multilingual workplace and beyond.

Keywords

multilingual, sociolinguistic, native, English, language ideology, EU, stance

1 Introduction

The research presented in this contribution took place in the linguistically superdiverse context of Luxembourg. Although Luxembourg counts only about 630,000 inhabitants, its economy attracts strong labour force migration and the quotidian is traditionally multilingual in Luxembourg (Purschke 2020). Nearly 200,000 cross-border workers commute to Luxembourg from the neighbouring countries (STATEC 2020) and the state administration can be addressed in four languages: Luxembourgish, French, German, and German sign language. In addition, English has gained more and more ground in the public space (Horner & Weber 2011). While the reasons for the rise of English use in Luxembourg’s multilingual public spaces have not been the focus of existing research, part of the explanation seems to be grounded in language ideologies accompanying the use of English as *lingua franca* or language of international business (de Bres 2017).

Nonetheless, the aim of the presented research is neither to exoticise Luxembourg as an *élite* multilingual space in the European Union, nor to explore the reasons for the continuing spread of English in global urban spaces with high migration. The objective is to investigate the social effects of the social distinction between ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ varieties of English in a linguistically diverse environment. The main question will be posed from a critical sociolinguistic angle and the contribution will draw attention to the problematic character of the ‘native/non-native’ dichotomy: “What social effects does the ‘native English speaker’ position bring about in a multilingual team of a supranational institution?”

The coming section of this paper will briefly introduce the place of research, participants and data collection. The next section will conceptualise the ‘native speaker’ and describe the method of sociolinguistic stance analysis. Then, the results will be presented: the typical stance positioning of the ‘native English speaker’ and the communicative hiccup in which the ‘native English’ positioning led to problematic language behaviour. This will be followed by a discussion on the relevance of the findings and implication for practice. Finally, a conclusion section will complete the contribution.

2 Place of research and data collection

The present analysis is part of a study investigating reflections on language practices in a terminology and communications team in an EU institution in Luxembourg. The unit did not represent one EU member state or language. Instead, it served the institution through whole and coordinated inter-unit-, inter-institutional-, and external cooperation projects. The unit was officially multilingual. However, its members used English as the main vehicular language to address a transnational (primarily namely European) public.

Data collection followed the principles of participative action research (McIntyre 2008) and employed a mix of qualitative methods – on-site observations, reflective drawing, longitudinal-, and one-off interviews. Interviewing incited participants’ reflections on language practices and socio-linguistic discursive positioning of the team members, proceeding in iterative rounds. After each round, the researcher shared her pre-analyses with the participants, who were then free to discuss the topics before the next round of interviews.

This contribution focuses on six Anglophone trainees during their five-month long traineeship. All of them were discursively positioned as ‘native English speakers’ in the team in the pilot phase in 2018/19 and the follow-up phase in 2020/21. Both phases started with the trainees reflecting on a traineeship term that was about to pass or had already passed

(Ben – Irish, Lucy – British, Kate – Maltese and Jolene – Luxembourgish) and continued by rounds of in-depth interviewing during their current traineeship term (Florence – British and Valerie – German). The participants’ names were pseudonymised to retain the participants’ anonymity.

The pilot study focused on the Anglophone experience and a report discussing the effects of language ideologies from a macro-social perspective has since been published in the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* (Lovrits & de Bres 2020). A follow-up study then involved all members of the team and explored the broader topic of languages and language practices in the unit. The position of the ‘native English’ trainee was not central to the follow-up investigation, but the ‘native English’ topic still resonated in the team and marked a pattern in the workplace. Thus, the present contribution will recall the main findings of the pilot project in light of additional data from the follow-up project, while further discussing the relevant theoretical aspects that may enhance methodology and practice in linguistics research.

3 Social construction of the ‘native’

The main interpretative framework will be set using the social constructivist paradigm that focuses on the socially constructed aspects of the commonly perceived reality (Berger & Luckmann 2001). Bourdieu’s poststructuralist social theory (1998, 2001) will further help to explain the social effects of the ascription of ‘native’ or ‘non-native’ status. This will, in turn, clarify that the potential linguistic difference between the ‘non/native’ varieties may be of less significance than the social ascription of the symbolic sociolinguistic status to its speakers.

According to Bourdieu (1998), individuals in the society take positions in an abstract matrix of mutual relations based on two basic principles – distinction and differentiation. Sometimes, following the interests of powerful social groups, the socially constructed differentiations are treated as innate, given, unchangeable distinctions. This limits the discussion on the fairness or practicality of the social set up, as it is considered a given. According to Bourdieu (2001), language hegemony produces a codified language and links it to a political entity. The standard language becomes officially produced, unified, checked, tested, and verified by the state and its certified institutions. Language hegemony then allows for only one ‘right’ variety; the geographical and social alternatives are demoted for the purpose of controlling their users (ibid.: 70-71).

The idea of a named language without varieties is mirrored in what is theorised as stereotypical *beliefs* (Doerr 2009: 20) and *language ideologies* (Pennycook 1994: 176) based

on the notion of ‘native speaker’. Within those beliefs/language ideologies, the ‘native speakers’ are seen as having a linguistic competence inherent to a homogeneous population in the given national state. This is portrayed through references to the national culture and language, disregarding the differences in socioeconomic stratification which are mirrored in the varieties of language use (Rampton 2003). The ‘native’ superiority is a perception informed by a monolingual lens that overemphasises the separation of languages (Arocena, Cenoz & Gorter 2015) and sees named languages as a mythical homogeneous entity without variation. However, no variation is intrinsically better than another; it is the status of their users that makes one variation more desirable than another (McKenzie 2013). Moreover, the ‘native speaker’ notion has troublesome links to colonialism (Pennycook 1994). Piller (2018), namely, shows how it has been used to discursively denigrate or elevate certain social groups in the (colonial) past.

The allegedly inevitable character of the ‘native’ category is also discursively strengthened by an imagined biological link. The term ‘mother tongue’ is often used as a synonym for the ‘native language’, accentuating the allegedly inborn nature of the ‘native’ category (Davies 2006). Drawing on the German philosophical tradition, Yildiz (2012: 12-13) describes this link as a “historic family romance with the mother tongue”, a fantasy, that the mother tongue is biologically connected to the maternal body.

Linguistic research and theory have also demonstrated that the ‘native speaker’ category is too vague a notion for research, being ultimately decided by a (self-)ascription of the ‘non-/native’ membership with a reference to (auto-)biography (Davies 2006). Recent research has also pointed out that “methodological nationalism” (Kraus 2018: 93) limits researchers’ understanding of language use in real life by associating language with (national) state. The critical approach has been gaining acceptance in the global research community over the last few decades. For instance, the editorial guideline of the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* now encourages authors “to reject a deficit view of multilingualism and hence avoid terms such as ‘native speaker, non-native speaker’ and use neutral terms such as ‘L1 user, LX user’ instead”.

Despite the above trends, the notion of ‘native’ speaker or language often remains unscrutinised in language research. Explorations of the social effects of its ideological connotations have been mainly limited to the domain of education, where the ‘non-native’ teachers face systemic discrimination in the global labour market (Doerr 2009) and learners have to bow down to the pedagogically questionable ideal of the ‘native speaker’ (Dewaele &

Saito 2022). Thus, this contribution elaborates on the constructivist character of the topic and the respective agency that individual speakers have over its effects, pointing out the importance of critically examining the use of the ‘native’ category in research and practice. The expressions ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ will be used in quotation marks in order to remind the reader that the category is treated as socially constructed and imagined by participants in varying ways.

4 Sociolinguistic analysis of stance

Stance as an analytical tool is defined according to three constitutive aspects. It consists of the object of stance, stance positioning (of the speaker towards the object), and its alignment or misalignment with the positioning of other speakers (Du Bois 2007). Stance is considered to be the speaker’s primary concern in conversation (Kiesling 2009) and has been employed in linguistics in two main ways.

First, interactional linguistics uses stance to focus on the use of linguistic forms, words or syntactic forms indicating conversational turns (Kärkkäinen 2003, Wu 2003, Du Bois 2007). Second, discourse analysis links macro-social (often political) discourse to the micro-level of individual and group interests through stance (Englebretson 2001, Jaffe 2009). So, the discursive take on stance analytically joins the ideologically (discursively) shaped *structure* of workplace communication with the individual *agency* of speakers over their communicative status (Jaffe 2009).

The presented study aims to link individual experience to the phenomena of broader social importance, notably language ideologies and their socio-cultural context. Thus, the discursive analysis of stances will be employed. The next subsection will present the results of the analysis, starting with the identification of the common object of stances – who is considered the ‘native English speaker’, his/her typical stance positioning, and the social effects it brings about. In the second subsection, an analysis of a recurring tension linked to language choice will show how the positioning of ‘native English speaker’ created tensions.

4.1 Typical positioning of the ‘native English speaker’

The investigated object of stance was the ‘native English speaker’. Participants treated the ‘native speaker’ category as a fact defined by the geopolitical affiliation of the speaker. On top of that, the category was culturally defined as ‘British’ for the British participants, while the mental representations of other participants included other potential English-speaking environments in Europe. The bilingual participants also felt less constrained by the

fact that they were considered ‘native English speakers’, because their positioning was less linked to their identity, as Kate’s stance exemplifies:

- (1) *K: So- (.) bu- but ahm, being referred to kind of, as a- as a native English speaker was- was kind of a (..) nice thing for me. I- I would put it. Yeah, I- it was a nice thing, because it was- first of all, it wasn’t something I expected or applied to do.*

Along with the geopolitical affiliation, the ‘native English speaker’ was identified by the ability to not make “huge/terrible/detrimental linguistic mistakes”. Nonetheless, over the course of five traineeship terms, no participant could recall any such a mistake. At the same time, the ‘native English’ were praising their colleagues’ English, as illustrated below¹:

- (2) *V: Sometimes they’re not too sure about their English and it’s really – it’s top-notch. It’s really good.*

Researcher: But you keep proofreading anyway.

V: Yes, because of course it has to be the .. top standard.

Although the participants did talk about coming across texts that “apparently were not written by a ‘native’”, non-idiomatic texts never caused any problem. It is remarkable that the study could not trace any experience of a problem with a ‘non-native’ variety of English, even though there were, at times, no ‘native English’ trainees on the team. Instead, the participants focused on imagined social consequences, such as being laughable or making the unit look bad. The ‘native English’ trainee was positioned as a protector against imagined reproaches concerning non-idiomatic English use. His/her main role was proofreading. That positioning was both advantageous and limiting.

First, some ‘native English’ participants enjoyed proofreading, whereas others frowned upon it. In any case, they had not expected to be given this task when they applied for the traineeship. Moreover, proofreading could take up a significant share of their time at work, which was not controlled by the superiors. Indeed, the actual scope of ‘naturally occurring’ proofreading tasks was one of the surprises this study brought to the light.

Second, the ‘native English’ trainees coming from English-speaking countries understood that the ‘native speaker’ category was defined by extralinguistic aspects (being from somewhere or born to somebody who is from somewhere), not by their actual linguistic performance. As such, they did not consider their ‘native language’ to be a personal skill they could showcase at work. As a result, they felt objectified. They were under the impression that the ‘native’ language variety was considered important, as opposed to their individual skills. Ben gave a sigh that summed up this type of positioning:

- (3) *B: ... Uhm, I didn't really know it beforehand (..) but it kind of became clear on the first day (..) that (.) I was selected because of the fact that I was a native speaker. So (..) I don't really know how I felt about that at the time? Because I'd like – I'd like to think that it was (..) my experience and my studies, my (..) professional experience to that date.*

The third limiting consequence of the 'native English speaker' positioning was that the 'native English speakers' were considered monolingual and therefore found themselves in an undesired English-only communicative environment. Indeed, the 'native English' variety was put at the top of the hierarchy of English uses, but the trainees' ultimate goal was to become actively *multilingual*. Thus, the English-only regime expected of the 'native English speakers' thwarted their desire to develop multilingual skills while working abroad. They would have preferred more opportunities to practise other languages:

- (4) *F: I proofread English and (.) it's needed (.) and yeah, so I think that it does the work, yeah. I think I am very much in my comfort zone, yeah. As well. It's not always something I (..) really enjoy being. I think it's good to be, you know, not always in your comfort zone, but – (..) but yeah.*

The Luxembourgish trainee was an exception. She was considered 'native English' based on one of her home languages and the fact that she had taken her university studies in the UK (she was also not 'abroad' in Luxembourg). Her social life was already multilingual, so she did not mind the English-only workplace (she also chose to use Luxembourgish in her interview, below is the researcher's own translation):

- (5a/Luxembourgish) *J: Et si Leit, di mengen, ech si vläicht- ech wär e Native-Speaker? Op Englesch. Well wann ech Englesch schwätzen, hunn ech en- hunn ech engleschen Accent? An ech mengen, datt erkläert firwat d'Leit mech heiansdo froen, wéi laang ech schonn a Lëtzebuerg gewunnt hunn? (lächelt) Um (...) Es sinn den déi Alles muss iwwerliesen? An ech maaen dat och gär.*

- (5b/English) *J: There are people who think I am – I am a native speaker? In English. Because when I speak English, I have an English accent? And I think that explains why people sometimes ask me, how long I have been living in Luxembourg? (smiles) Um (...) so I am the one who has to proofread everything? And I like to do that, too.*

The above excerpt also draws attention to the tendency to assume that a 'native' speaker must have a stable geopolitical affiliation and biography, as opposed to a migration or multilingual background. Such methodological nationalism obscures the criteria that define what language performance from a given geo-political area can be considered the 'native' variation for a linguistic corpus. Nevertheless, this phenomenon has hardly received any critical attention.

4.2 ‘Native English speaker’ in the middle of tensions

In general, the trainees enjoyed their stay and built positive relationships within the team. However, the analysis showed that the discursive elevation of the ‘native’ performance by superiors incited a tense atmosphere amongst junior colleagues, fuelling competition between the linguistic repertoires and language ideologies in the society to the detriment of team cooperation. The ‘native English speaker’ positioning brought about unchallenged presumptions of power relations that twisted their communication.

The British participants strongly felt their ‘native English’ positioning – they both referred to it when reflecting on how they dealt with the language choices of their colleagues. At some point in the pilot project, dialogues in the trainee office turned to Spanish, which the British trainees did not understand. Data and theory suggest the following explanations for this change (a combination of these may be relevant in this case). First, the follow-up study revealed that some team members did not realise how uncomfortable it may be, to be present in a room while one’s co-workers are speaking in an unfamiliar language. One reason for the Spanish-speaking colleagues using Spanish could be that they were immersed in the discourse on ‘global Spanish’ as a language that is somehow, at least passively, understood ‘everywhere’ (van den Worp et al. 2018). Over time, the use of Spanish could have developed into a more or less conscious act of revenge on the ‘native English speakers’.

Whatever the reason for the use of Spanish, both British trainees felt excluded, by way of a direct discursive reference to their ‘native English’ positioning in the workplace. However, they were reluctant to ask colleagues to speak English, assuming that this would reinforce the stereotype of privileged monolingual British people abroad. Lucy tried to seek support from another Spanish colleague, complaining about her exclusion. Instead, she received confirmation that her stereotypical positioning as an English-speaking monolingual was salient:

- (6) *L: I couldn’t understand, like I couldn’t work on the project, because I didn’t know what they were talking about. And I was complaining to [a colleague] and he was like: “Oh, you English speakers!” I understand – (..) But I was like – it’s – you know, if it’s for work and I couldn’t understand what we’re working on?*

While Lucy gave up and the colleagues finished the project without her, Florence (in another team of trainees) was more active when she was similarly excluded. When her colleagues started to speak Spanish in her presence, she hinted indirectly, and then directly, that the situation was uncomfortable for her. Since this seemed to have no effect, she turned to passive-aggressive behaviour and “tactically” forced the colleagues to speak English, in her

own words. She arranged a loud talk to her colleagues and made sure their superiors could hear it:

- (7) *F: [I will-] (bursting out laughing) Like it wouldn't be outwardly, but I'll be keeping it in mind. Like: "Okay!" (amused voice) (..) You know. I'll play up to (..) my native English role (amused voice) you know (..) if I need to. (laughing)*

That strategy technically worked, since the dialogues turned to English again. However, she still felt excluded by her colleagues.

Although the collected data do not allow for a conclusion that the 'native English' were excluded by their colleagues on purpose, trainees in the follow-up project in 2020-21 did cautiously talk about "leveraging" the 'native' privilege with skills in other languages, which the 'native English' trainees supposedly lacked. That said, the bilinguals from the follow-up project did not share the experience of 'native English' exclusion. However, their 'non-native English' colleagues perceived the adulation of 'native English' as an injustice and wanted the seniors to either refrain from elevating the 'native English' or to recognise other relevant skills in the 'non-native English' trainees with a similar discursive gratitude.

5 Discussion

Bourdieu notes (1998) that declaring categories and assigning them to a group of people engenders social relations which are often uncontested, because they are gradually perceived as 'natural' and a given. This is the case of the 'native speaker' and 'native language' notion. Had the 'native English speakers' in this study discussed the social constructedness of sociolinguistic positioning during their studies, they would no doubt have been better prepared for a multilingual workplace. They could have, at least, tried to question the stereotypes or expressed their desire to be included and/or to practise other languages.

To overcome the illusion of inevitability of the 'native' categories, we may need to critically rethink their use, not only in our day-to-day lives but also in professional discussions. In cases where the localisation and socio-historical context of language is relevant, we should clearly define what constitutes the linguistic variation we are looking for. Instead of referring to the vague 'native speaker' category, we may want to ask: what is an acceptable deviation in what aspects of language use (vocabulary, grammar, style, intertextuality, etc.) and what are the (social, political, legal, professional and other) aspects we have to respect?

In applied linguistics, meta-pragmatic awareness and framing of varieties in the classroom should also be put under the spotlight. Although language teachers must choose

a standard model for teaching, they could prepare students for more than the obligatory standardised tests, for instance by considering life in multilingual environments. Indeed, practitioners sometimes get the impression that teaching language in laboratory-like conditions is enough, because all that the public can see are the results of standardised tests (CEFR/TOEFL). However, this teaching method disregards the social function of language, the individual and social identity linked to the sociolinguistic positioning, and the social and historical (in the case of English post-colonial) contexts in which language users must navigate worldwide.

Ultimately, in linguistically diverse contexts of international mobility, it may be difficult to assume language competence according to country, language of schooling or ‘home languages’. Even the ‘native’ category, defined as a monolingual experience from a defined geo-political area, does not guarantee that the person uses a locally typical or standard language, let alone that s/he will be ready for professional linguistic performance. The language use of the ‘natives’ varies as much as that of the ‘non-natives’, mirroring their socioeconomic, professional or family background, situational aspects and personal ability to use language in a pragmatically effective way.

6 Conclusion

Two main issues have been highlighted in this contribution. The first is the unnecessary ‘native English speakerism’ accompanying language production intended for an international public. Despite language performance being at the centre of all activities in the terminology and communications unit, the potential linguistic differences between the varieties did not matter in this workplace as much as the social ascription of the symbolic sociolinguistic status. The ‘non-native’ varieties were discursively constructed as socially risky, while the ‘native English speakers’ were assigned a symbolic power, a ‘magical touch’ that was supposed to protect the unit from external criticism. In the time spent researching this team, no instances of criticism were uncovered – and it is likely that these reproaches never occurred, since all team members were language professionals working in a global context. Nevertheless, even though the risk of non-standard linguistic fails was apparently elusive, the social effects of the ‘native English speaker’ positioning were experienced as real.

This brings us to the conclusion of the second main issue. The ‘native English’ participants were ascribed a workplace role defined by their sociolinguistic membership which was traditionally framed as advantageous but was not always so in practice. Not only were the ‘native English’ speakers often disappointed by the social effects of their

sociolinguistic positioning in the team, the study also showed that the discursive elevation of the ‘native’ English variety and ‘its’ speakers was at times to the detriment of the team’s ability to cooperate. The exact trigger(s) for such a situation are not fully clear. The tensions most probably arose when the cultural and language ideology aspects of the ‘native English’ positioning came to the foreground and/or when a subliminal competition for linguistic control over the workplace was triggered among junior team members.

As for the limitations, the presented findings stem from a micro-level qualitative study and in that sense, they are highly dependent on its context. However, this contribution illustrates a novel perspective that questions assumptions guiding research design in research on language. With the aim of enhancing research methodology, future research may benefit from paying more attention to the social effects of meta-pragmatic talk and engaging in critical investigations of conceptual boundaries of traditional heuristic tools like the ‘native speaker’.

To sum up, the identified adverse social effects of the ‘native English speaker’ positioning, an undesired English-only communicative space together with the sociolinguistic positioning burdened the ‘native English speakers’ with unwanted (often amateur) proofreading and thwarted their plans to develop multilingual skills while working abroad. Moreover, the discursive elevation of the ‘native speakers’ at times incited a tense atmosphere among the trainees. The conclusions align with the findings of critical research employing other methods over the last few decades – despite the vagueness, imaginary character, and no clearly definable *linguistic* characteristics constructing the ‘native’ category, its use can induce real-life ‘native speaker’ effects. However, it should be underlined that individual language users are not mere puppets in a scene set by social conditions. Social discourse creates a matrix of interpersonal power relations, mutual sociolinguistics positioning and prestige of certain varieties, but individuals always retain their agency.

Knowledge of the above offers an empowering socio-pragmatic awareness. Just as the awareness of malleability of sociolinguistic positioning and the related social effects seems indispensable for teachers and other language professionals, so is it also for students and the general public. It is moreover important for the interdisciplinary dialogue. We should acknowledge differing attitudes towards the variations, be sensitive to stances towards them, and in doing so, we may cultivate them in professional as well as informal discussions.

Notes

¹ Transcription conventions: extracts are transcribed broadly, with paralinguistic features and seconds of silence indicated in brackets, emphasised in bold. Interrupted sentence is indicated with a dash.

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