



# The pragmatic realization of the native speaking English teacher as a monolingual ideal

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the pragmatic realization of monolingual native speakerhood as an idealized abstraction through the discourse analysis of a real-life encounter between an English teacher, Marie, and three Japanese undergraduate students of English in a conversation lounge of a university in Japan, which is circumscribed by an English-only policy. Such problematic realization of an ideal is approached from a multimethodological perspective of analysis which combines a discourse pragmatics of Gricean implicature, founded on the maxim of quality, or truth, with a focus on metacommunication and its consequentiality of meaning. By these analytic means, the paper charts Marie's attempt to remodel self and language use in line with monolingual policy through the dynamics of teacher–student interaction as an institutionalized process, which is bracketed off from conversation as ritualized pretence. Conformity to monolinguality is thereby seen to index the institutional persona of the teacher as native speaker, which may contrast starkly with the lived experience of the flesh-and-blood person of interpersonal communication, as implicit in the institutional designation of the event as conversation practice.

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## 1. Introduction: the native speaker as ideal

As a longstanding myth, the native speaker has served as an abstract construct which can be molded any which way in the intuitive appeal to correctness of language use (Mey, 1981; Davies, 2003). In this way divorced from the 'performance' of language in the form of participant utterances in their situated context of use, he or she presents a model akin to Chomsky's ideal speaker and hearer, namely, 'a figment of our imagination' (Mey, 1981:70) – a figure of authority which may reign supreme in being so firmly rooted in its very rootlessness. As such, the native speaker is a figure born of normative appeal.

Yet despite a corresponding critique of the moot value of such myth serving as a model in linguistic description (Mey, 1981), or its relevance to the more pragmatic concerns of applied linguists with their feet planted firmly on socio-cultural ground (e.g. Leung et al., 1997; Rampton, 2003 [1990]), the native speaker presents an ongoing reality in the recruitment practices of many educational institutions worldwide, requiring such formulated status of their real-life language teachers; and especially of their *English* teachers, given the pervasive kudos of this language in particular (Crystal, 2003a; Pennycook, 2007). In practice, the interpretation of such nativeness may favour those born, bred, and/or officially resident as nationals in countries of the so-called inner circle, i.e. "the traditional bases of English – the regions where it is the primary language" (Kachru, 1985:12). Yet distinctions between these geographically and culturally diverse locations may remain

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impressionistically undefined in light of their unstated authority to represent authenticity of speakerhood. Such teachers, then, serve as living models of the myth (cf. Davies, 2003).

Language use by native speaking teachers may further imply its *sole* use in adherence to English-only policies of their institutions of employment, supported by enduring methodological trends in language teaching which provide a motivational, acquisitional and arguably hegemonic rationale to one-language pedagogy in action, to which the teachers themselves may ascribe (Phillipson, 1992; Auerbach, 1993). Hence, teachers in English-only educational environments further present living models of a *monolingual* myth of native speakerhood, ideationally centred on the traditional core of the inner circle countries (Phillipson, 1992), namely, on the assumption that '[j]ust as people are usually citizens of one country, people are native speakers of one mother tongue' (Rampton, 2003: 108 [1990]). Such normative beliefs may be widely upheld by a politics of one-language ideology, serving simultaneously to construct both internal unity and a uniqueness of regional/national identity vis-à-vis differentiated others (Joseph, 2006; Auerbach, 1993). In particular relation to ELT, the construct of the English native speaker further serves to uphold an industry which has flourished outwards from its traditional core (Naysmith, 1986/1987).

Yet, the abstraction of native speakerhood, to which linguists and language teachers may appeal in rationalization of their intuitive judgements of correctness of use, itself suggests omniscience of a language in all of its functional domains of use, or an imagined and omnipresent monolingual supremacy. Without fleshing the native speaker out in a real-life garb of sociolinguistic attributes, he or she thus remains both monolingual and monocultural (Kramsch, 1998) – highly standardized to fit an anglophonic mold, yet otherwise neither particularized, nor essentialized.

Monolingual policy in institutions of language learning further restricts mastery of a language by the native teacher to this language alone, as it in practice rules out bilingualism of any kind, whether maximally or minimally conceived, with the latter implying any degree of proficiency in (an)other language(s). Thus, the native speaking teacher, in practiced adherence to policy, becomes monolingual in this functional domain of employment, regardless of his or her proficiencies in other languages, as exercised elsewhere.

The current paper concerns itself with the question of how such idealization of the monolingual native speaking teacher might actually manifest itself in interactional practice, as necessarily rooted within a particular case, namely, that of a Canadian teacher, Marie, who finds herself in precisely such situated context of language use – in the conversation lounge of a Japanese university with an English-only policy. As a longstanding resident of Japan who is fluent in Japanese, Marie herself contrasts starkly with the idealized native speaker as vacuum-sealed monolingual and monocultural being of a sociolinguistically undefined speech community of anglophonic abstraction.

Such discrepancy between idealization and reality of lived experience would appear to have thus far remained underinvestigated, if not uninvestigated, through the analysis of discourse. For this reason, the paper aims to provide one such in-depth illustration of the potential conflict of self definition of the native speaker in pragmatic realization of the myth of monolinguality, as upheld by institutional policy. Such tensions, as manifest through discourse, can be seen to shed light on the very mythological status of the monolingual native speaker itself, as embodied in the person of the teacher. In particular, the interpersonal and interactional effects of adherence to monolinguality can be seen to reflexively index the institutional processes at work in its construction.

In order to examine the *pragmatic* realization of Marie as monolingual ideal, the study adopts a cross-disciplinary approach to the analysis of spoken discourse which allows for a fuller understanding of the potential conflict of self definition between the native speaker as a flesh-and-blood, socio-culturally situated individual with experiential knowledge of things other than his or her own language(s) and culture(s), and the idealized counterpart – the native speaker as monolingual master of its own amorphous, anglophonic territory, yet at the same time enshrined in naivety of the foreign soils in which it has failed to take root. To these ends, the paper first expounds its discourse analytic approach to pragmatics, as pertinent to the 'self' construction of the native speaking teacher, before analysing in depth two segments of Marie's conversation, which allow for further discussion of divergence between myth and reality of lived experience.

## 2. Data and analysis

The paper analyzes data from one particular conversation between Marie, a Canadian teacher of English as a foreign language in her thirties, and three Japanese undergraduate sophomore students in the conversation lounge of a private university in Japan, which specializes in the study of foreign languages and cultures.<sup>1</sup> The conversation lounge aims to provide the students with an informal setting in which to make conversation with on-duty teachers, who are employed by the university first and foremostly to contribute to the practice-based components of its English language degree programmes.

The physical space of the conversation lounge is itself circumscribed by an *English-only* policy, as communicated via signs posted at the entrance and on the walls. The policy thus testifies to an institutionalized bias towards English over other languages, numerically warranted by the large quantity of students enrolled in English language courses, which reflects the more widespread popularity of the language in Japan, as publicly endorsed in discourses of government and education (Kubota, 1998, 2002; Seargeant, 2009). The lounge itself presents an idealized monolingual environment, in which the on-duty teachers, touted as 'native speakers' of the language in promotional materials, act as living models of informal and so-called 'authentic' spoken communication (cf. Seargeant, 2005).

<sup>1</sup> The names of the participants, who signed consent forms safeguarding their anonymity, are pseudonyms.

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