Mary Thomas

I am Indian, very brown,
born in Malabar,
I speak three languages,
write in two, dream in one.
Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue.
Why not leave me alone,
Critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you?
Why not let me speak in any language
I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English,
half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is human as I am human,
don't you see?
It voices my joys, my longings,
my hopes, and it is as useful to me as
cawing is to crows or roaring to lions,
It is human speech, the speech of the
mind that is here and not there,
a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware ...'

Kamala Das

Who is a 'native speaker' of a language? It is very
seldom that this term is defined precisely in either
a language teaching or a language learning situa-
tion. More often than not its meaning and sug-
gested connotations are tacitly implied. It is time
that some suggestions as to what it denotes and
may connote are offered if we wish to pursue
language teaching and learning in a realistic man-
ner.

It is not sufficient for us to discuss the phrase,
'a native speaker,' in general terms since it would
be very difficult to offer some insight into this
term if it is discussed in isolation or in a vacuum.
Thus, it may be more appropriate if we attempt
to answer the question, 'a native speaker' of what?
The discussion will then be focused on the need to
offer some explanations as to its meaning or sense.
Since English is a second language in Malaysia, it
may be helpful if we direct our attention to who
'a native speaker of English' is in this context.

Definitions of 'a native speaker of English'

Generally, the question of a native speaker of a
language is linked to the question of ethnic origin.
Thus, it is only natural for us to assume that an
Englishman is a native speaker of English just
as we would assume a Malay to be a native speaker
of Bahasa Malaysia. However, we will face pro-
blems with the latter assumption because a Malay
is viewed as a native speaker of his own loghat or
dialect. He becomes, or rather attains the status
of, a native speaker of Bahasa Malaysia through
formal education. Here, education acts as the
process through which he acquires standard Bahasa
Malaysia and in this manner equips him with the
unconscious or tacit awareness of how his learned
knowledge of language usage can be put into in-
stances of natural or unconscious language use.
The dialect, in this case, is seen as a supportive
tool in the acquisition of standard language. This
then does not mean that the person involved in
this process will discard the 'support tool', in this
case, the dialect, once he has acquired the product
— the standard language. What may likely result is
the ability of such a speaker to operate within a
'sheaf of grammars' as Hockett states, (Corder,
1979, p. 56) and also to engage in meaningful
language interaction in a number of speech acts by
code-shifting whenever necessary.

It may also be pertinent for us to consider the
period in which language is acquired or learned. It
is here that the distinction between mother
tongue/first language acquisition and second/
foreign language learning may be helpful in provid-
ing some insight into the idea of who a native
speaker of a language is. Most people generally
assume the mother tongue to be also the first
language. This assumption is likely to be true in
societies which are by nature monolingual. How-
ever, in plural societies where bi/multi lingualism
is more the norm rather than the exception, the
mother tongue and the first language are usually
not the same. Before we proceed, it may be useful
to remind ourselves that, 'the concept of a lan-
guage is a matter of social psychology' (Corder,
1979 p. 53) It is therefore a matter of attitudinal
perception. The problem of placing boundaries
in classifying languages arises because language is

seen as a continuum consisting of several varieties and thus the point where one begins and the other ends becomes a matter of individual perception.

Language classification can be seen from the point of view of the following:

(a) the speaker's ethnic origin;
(b) the chronological sequence of acquisition or learning, and;
(c) the functional use to which it is put.

Thus the concept of mother tongue is related to matters of ethnic origin. The chronological sequencing of acquisition or learning places language into either first or second language categories and the functions of a language in society classifies language into either a second or a foreign language. In such circumstances we come to realize that the mother tongue and the first language need not be the same as may be the case in a monolingual society.
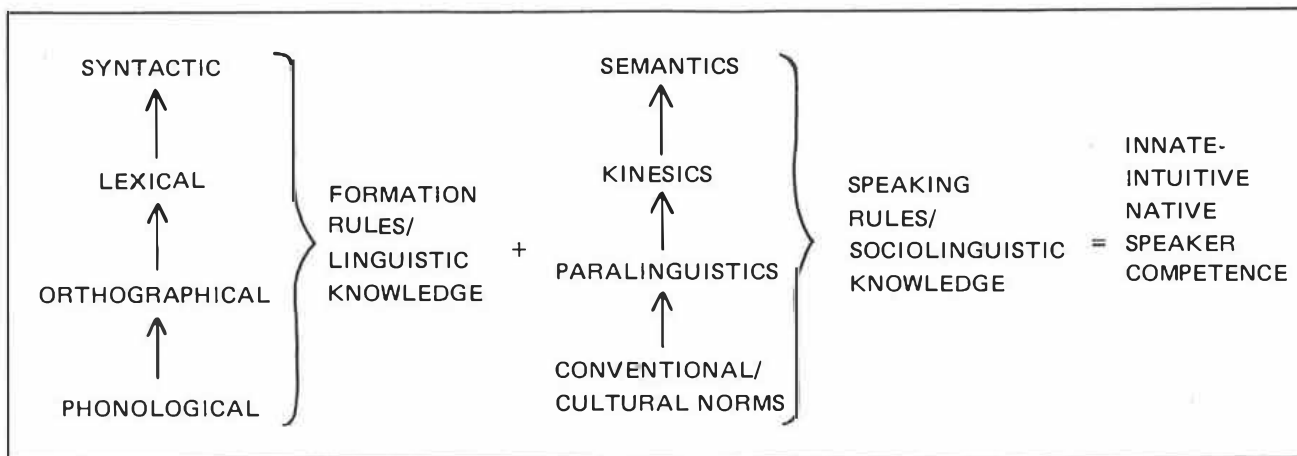
In considering the idea of who a native speaker is, the chronological sequence of acquisition or learning becomes important. Thus, the question of when a language is acquired and in what type of environment becomes a crucial factor in ascribing native speaker status to a speaker of a language. This finds support in Lyons' statement that native languages are acquired in childhood as opposed to second languages which are learned, 'after what is normally thought of as the critical period for language acquisition' (Lyons, 1981, p. 287). Thus, we come to realize that an individual can be a native speaker of not one but of several languages.

Competence — Performance

Apart from the fact that a native speaker of a language would have most usually acquired the language during the critical age period, it is also necessary to discuss the concept of competence — performance in relation to a native speaker and a non native speaker of a language. Competence in this discussion will be seen in terms of a speaker's linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge. Linguistic competence is categorised into the four levels of language organisation namely: (a) phonological; (b) orthographical; (c) lexical; (d) syntactic, and sociolinguistic knowledge is seen from the four levels of language use namely: (a) paralinguistic; (b) kinesic; (c) conventional/cultural; (d) semantic. It is the unconscious combination of these two components, that is, the knowledge of linguistic organisation and the knowledge of sociolinguistic use, that helps the speaker to perform or gives him the ability to use language both acceptably and appropriately for effective communication. The diagram below succinctly presents the components which contribute towards innate-intuitive native speaker competence.

Although the diagram gives the impression that the components within linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge are vertically organised and the relationship between linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge is linearly organised, this is not the case in reality. It is necessary for us to realize that innate-intuitive competence is the result of simultaneous acquisition of both the formation and the speaking rules. They are thus not discretely acquired but acquired simultaneously in an unconscious manner and through an integrated process.

COMPONENTS CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS INNATE-INTUITIVE NATIVE SPEAKER COMPETENCE

SYNTACTIC
↑
LEXICAL
↑
ORTHOGRAPHICAL
↑
PHONOLOGICAL

FORMATION RULES/ LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE

+

SEMANTICS
↑
KINESICS
↑
PARALINGUISTICS
↑
CONVENTIONAL/ CULTURAL NORMS

SPEAKING RULES/ SOCIOLINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE

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INNATE-INTUITIVE NATIVE SPEAKER COMPETENCE

If we say that the formation and the speaking rules are unconsciously and simultaneously acquired, then what proof have we to come to such a conclusion? The only proof we have with regard to the process of acquisition is in the ability of the interlocutor to select and match language use with the context of situation. Thus language performance as functional ability (defined as traversing the gamut of language use from the basic to the literary level) acts as an indicator of the intuitive-innate knowledge at both the linguistic and the sociolinguistic levels present within interlocutors in a speech act.

It becomes pertinent at this juncture to make a cursory reference to the possible processes or moves which occur within an individual during the encoding-decoding cycle. Before any form of communication can be transmitted there must be initially, on the part of the speaker/encoder, an intention or a message that needs to be communicated to the listener/decoder. It is this intention or message which triggers off the various moves necessary for acceptable-appropriate communication to occur. If we view the communication (encoding-decoding) model presented below we will get a clear picture of the likely processes involved in the act of communication.

The model may give the view that the communication process is a step-by-step process. Although this process in the language learner may resemble the incremental model of communication presented here the processes involved in this model are speeded up in the language performance of the innate-intuitive native speaker. The model used by such a speaker would then be the anticipatory-prediction model. This is the reason for the smooth transition in the enunciation and the response that occur between the speaker-listener operating in the capacity of native speakers of a language. Thus, language performance for the native speaker is an unconscious natural act in the process of communication. However, in the case of a non native speaker of a language, the whole act becomes a conscious, learned process. This is one of the contributing reasons for transitional inadequacies which occur with such speakers. It seems plausible form observations of non native speakers of a language that they may be operating on an 'assimilation-accommodation' model (Lieven, 1982, p. 11), and thus achieving defective-effective communication. Language performance in this case is in a transitional stage between the conscious learning of the rules of usage and use, and the unconscious use of these rules in situations of interaction which becomes a
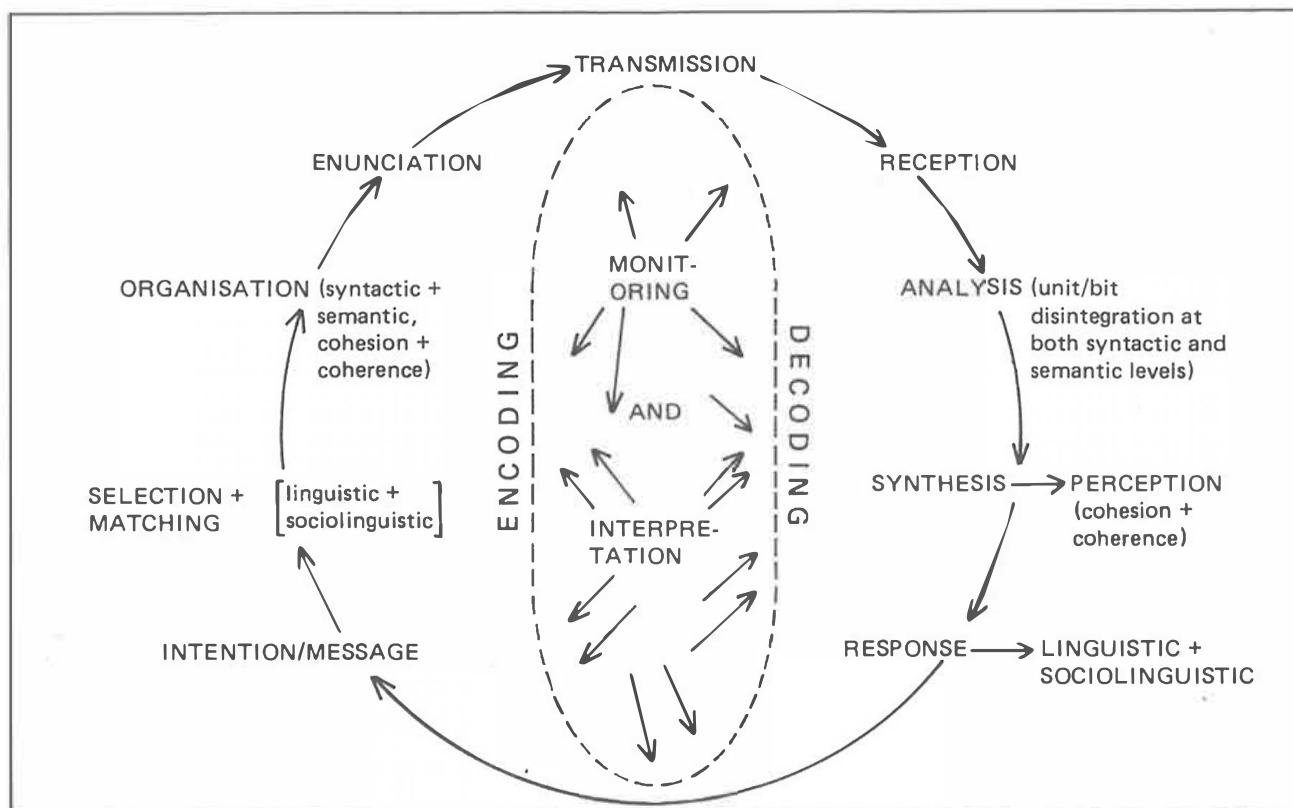
COMMUNICATION MODEL (ADAPTED FROM CORDER, 1979, p. 124)

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manifestation of language ability.

We are now aware of the main differences between a native speaker of a language whose language ability is a natural phenomenon of normal, everyday language use in a supportive native language environment, and a non native speaker of a language whose language ability is the result of language learning and whose use of the language is restricted to specific domains of language use in a rather passive non native language environment.

The distinction between a native and a non native speaker of a language is important for those directly involved in language teaching. The native speaker of a language who is at the same time a teacher of that language will find it difficult to put his 'hunches' and intuitive knowledge across to his learners if he is not consciously equipped with both the formation and the speaking rules. In like manner, the non native speaker who may at the same time be a teacher of that language will not be able to service his learners well if he has not developed the unconscious competence necessary for acceptable-appropriate language use. The question that comes to mind at this point is: can a non native speaker of a language achieve the unconscious competence/performance of a native speaker? Assuming that the non native speaker of the target language learned it after the critical age period, then it is likely that he may not achieve native speaker status at the phonological level of language use due to physiological reasons. Thus, he would at this level display his non native speaker status although he may perform with native speaker competence at all the other levels of language organisation assuming the existence of a supportive target (native) language environment. It is therefore important that the language teacher develops his second language ability, the English Language, in the Malaysian context, to this level of near native speaker competence. The point to remember is that any spaker of a language can achieve native speaker status in that language provided he has acquired it during the critical age period through a process of total immersion in the culture, language and environment of the said language.

Conclusion

The question of who a native speaker of a language is will remain a debatable issue and will remain enigmatic to many in the field of language teaching and learning. However, some measure of clarification, with reference to this term is necessary if we wish to design realistic means of assessing language performance. It seems to be a rule of practice to use a native speaker of a language as the epitome of language performance and this same measure seems to be the yardstick used in the performance evaluation of language learners. Thus, the need for the clarification of this term.

A native speaker of a language, in the context of this paper, is seen as an individual who uses a language with innate-intuitive competence and is one who has acquired the said language during the critical age period. Even if this seems plausible, we have to bear in mind that 'the language of each individual is unique and peculiar to himself', (Corder, 1979, p. 54) and will contain idiosyncratic features which will distinguish him from every other speaker of that language. It therefore follows that each language speaker is a native speaker of his own idiolect (parole) and not of a language (the totality of grammatical and speaking rules shared by the members of a speech community) as such; although members of a speech community share 'a major part of their grammatical systems in common'. (Corder, 1979, p. 65) In teaching a language we are, therefore, trying to help the learner internalize the grammatical and the sociolinguistic common core elements of the target language. The language teacher should thus possess both the intuitive and the concsious competence necessary to assist the learner in achieving acceptable-appropriate language performance.

It is hoped that this discussion has helped to clarify the term 'a native speaker of a language' to a degree and that it has also helped to stimulate thought as to the need to clarify terms before we begin to engage ourselves in the processes of language teaching and learning.

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