

NATIVE SPEAKER: FROM IDEALIZATION TO POLITICIZATION

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Résumé

Par politicisation, j'entends un processus qui conduit à faire du *locuteur natif* une notion porteuse d'idéologies politiques du langage. Entrepris à la fin des années 1960 par la critique approfondie que fait Hymes du *locuteur-auditeur idéal* (Chomsky 1965), ce mouvement prend une dimension globalisée avec l'émergence de « voix subalternes » des situations postcoloniales – un phénomène qui se traduit en linguistique appliquée par la reconnaissance progressive des « World Englishes ». Même si elle est centrale dans bien des travaux, la politicisation de concepts linguistiques n'est pas sans poser des problèmes aussi bien pratiques que théoriques, ce dont les chercheurs sont explicitement conscients. En ce sens, l'objectif de cet article est également de montrer que la politicisation du terme *locuteur natif* mène paradoxalement, dans une certaine mesure, au rejet du politique hors du champ de la théorie scientifique. En d'autres termes, *locuteur natif* ne serait pas une catégorie valide en linguistique, précisément parce qu'elle serait plus politique que scientifique. Politiciser le terme serait dès lors une manière de diminuer sa pertinence scientifique en mettant en valeur sa dimension idéologique : le *locuteur natif* serait avant tout une idéologie de l'état-nation.

Mots-clés

Postcolonialisme, États-nations, Idéologies linguistiques

Abstract

By *politicization*, I refer to a process that leads to the fact that *native speaker*, as a linguistic categorization, is said to be conveying political ideologies about language. Initiated in the late 1960s by Hymes's searching critique of the *ideal speaker-listener* (Chomsky 1965), this movement was to be taken to a globalized level with the "emergence of subaltern voices" in postcolonial settings – a phenomenon that is translated as the "rise of World Englishes" in the field of applied linguistics. Even if central in many current bodies of work, the politicization of linguistic concepts does not go without practical as well as theoretical problems of which researchers are obviously aware. In that sense, the goal of this paper is also to show that the politicization of the term *native speaker* leads, paradoxically, to the rejection of politics outside the boundaries of scientific theory to a certain extent. In other words, *native speaker* would not be a proper category for linguistics precisely because it is more political than scientifically accurate. Politicizing the term would then be a way of lessening its scientific relevance by emphasizing its ideological dimension: *native speaker* would primarily be an ideology of the nation-state.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, Nation-states, Language ideologies

An important date in the debate about the use of the term *native speaker* in contemporary linguistics would be Chomsky's assertion in the opening pages of his 1957 *Syntactic Structures*:

One way to test the adequacy of grammar proposed for L is to determine whether or not the sequences that it generates are actually grammatical *i.e.* acceptable to a native speaker [...] (Chomsky 1957).

Though the term had been used before in English-speaking linguistics ¹, this statement triggered a wave of hostile reactions which, under various guises, still produces a significant amount of literature today. Given the fact that the Chomskyan position is frequently taken as a starting point by the critics of the *native speaker*, this paper argues that the recent history of the term *native speaker* can accurately be described as a politicization of the term, in contrast to Chomsky's self-claimed neutral position. In this debate, Chomsky's work represents the idealization of scientific objects in a self-claimed "Galilean style" (Botha 1981), when his critiques can be described as belonging to the broad field of applied linguistics, dealing with the "real world" ². By *politicization*, I thus refer to a process that leads to the fact that *native speaker*, as a linguistic categorization, is said to be conveying political ideologies about language (Blommaert 1999; Love 2009; Love and Ansaldo 2010). Initiated in the late 1960s by Hymes's searching critique of the *ideal speaker-listener* (Chomsky 1965), this movement was to be taken to a globalized level with the "emergence of subaltern voices" (Benitez Pezzolano, Gajic and Appratto 2000, p. 94) in postcolonial settings – a phenomenon that is translated as the "rise of World Englishes" (Jindapitak and Teo 2013) in the field of applied linguistics.

- 1 Whitney (1875) uses "mother tongue" along with "native speech". See also Bloomfield (1933): "The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language." In his paper entitled "The struggle for a theory of the native speaker", Yngve (1981) does not even quote Chomsky – exploring instead Bloomfield and Schleicher's work, for example.
- 2 See BAAL – The British Association for Applied Linguistics (1994, p. 2): "Applied linguistics is both: an approach to understanding language issues in the real world, drawing on theory and empirical analysis; an interdisciplinary area of study, in which linguistics is combined with issues, methods and perspectives drawn from other disciplines."

Even if central in many current bodies of work, the politicization of linguistic concepts does not go without practical as well as theoretical problems of which researchers are obviously aware (Blommaert 2001; Joseph 2006). With this in mind, the goal of this paper is also to show that the politicization of the term *native speaker* leads, paradoxically, to the rejection of politics outside the boundaries of scientific theory. In other words, *native speaker* would not be a proper category for linguistics precisely because it is more political than scientifically accurate. Politicizing the term would then be a way of lessening its scientific relevance by emphasizing its ideological dimension: *native speaker* would primarily be an ideology of the nation-state (Bonfiglio 2010). However, assuming a clear-cut separation between what is political and what is not would be an untenable position:

It is a truism that any social label is inherently political; it encodes particular ideologies and carries with it specific histories and connotations (Milani 2012, p. 69).

It is therefore more exact to say that, according to the politicization movement that characterizes the history of its critiques, the term *native speaker* would not be a proper category for linguistics because the political values that it conveys contradict ethnographically grounded theories of language as a social object. The politicization of the term *native speaker* is therefore irreducible to a mere matter of terminology, and is rather to be understood as an epistemological stance.

1. *NATIVE AND IDEAL*: CHOMSKY'S NON-IDENTICAL TWINS

Had it only been for the opening page in Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, the controversy about *native speaker* might not have developed in the way it has. In fact, Chomsky only uses the term *native speaker* twice in his short book, the second passage being located in the chapter entitled "On the goals of linguistic theory":

Clearly, every grammar will have to meet certain external conditions of adequacy; *e.g.*, the sentences generated will have to be acceptable to the native speaker.

The first reviewers of the book don't focus on these two occurrences: they don't question them precisely because the term is regularly used in linguistics – especially descriptive linguistics, for which the *native speaker* is mostly a “data supplier” (Coulmas 1981, p. 7). In his review of *Syntactic structures* for *American Anthropologist*, Burling even talks about a *naïve* speaker rather than a *native* one:

The obvious example is the passive transformation in English by which *any naive speaker* of English can readily transform an active such as “The dog bit John” to the equivalent passive: “John was bitten by the dog” (Burling 1959, p. 161) [My emphasis].

In his long review for *Language*, Lees twice mentions the term *native speaker*, in contexts where it becomes the neutral equivalent of “informant”:

It is important to keep in mind that such tests are designed not only to determine whether two segments sound alike or different to *the native speaker* for one presentation, but also to determine whether the identification or distinction is made consistently. For this reason, the tested pair is presented to *the informant* in massive, randomized replication. Furthermore, by tape resplicing techniques such comparisons as that of the [u:] of [su:t] with the [u:] of ['u:t] may be made. It has been objected that *an informant* might easily learn to distinguish free variants, as in case 3 above, and thus invalidate the results (Lees 1957, p. 397) [My emphasis].

or the equivalent of “any speaker”, “any person”:

For example, we might demand of a useful grammatical theory that it explicate the following apparently *universal behavior of speakers* of languages: even in the presence of noise, *a native speaker* is able to identify correctly with a high degree of success single monosyllables spoken by a second native speaker. One can hardly call upon the grammatical redundancy of the language to explain this behavior; clearly there is something in the sounds themselves which the hearer can identify and classify properly, and this something must vary widely from language to language, since, in general, *a person* cannot perform very well in such an experiment if he listens to a foreign language (Lees 1957, p. 403) [My emphasis].

So the term *native speaker* is still not controversial at that time. Though very much attached to linguistic anthropology and descriptive linguistics, it is easily borrowed by generative grammar – a discipline that, in 1964,

Hymes still finds a place for in the vast and integrative enterprise formed by the *communicative ethnography*:

In complementary fashion, linguistic work concerned with the abilities and judgments of appropriateness on the part of *native speakers that generative grammar brings into focus* can contribute to the third and fourth aspects of the communicative ethnography³. Such notions, pursued fully, lead into full scale studies focused on the full range of factors conditioning the exercise of judgment and ability (Hymes 1964, p. 26) [My emphasis].

But throughout the years that follow the publication of *Aspects of a theory of syntax*, Hymes's critique becomes severe:

Chomsky's Russell lectures are a case in point. The first lecture, "On Interpreting the World," presents implications of a certain conception of the nature of language and of the goals of linguistic research, leading to a humanistic, libertarian conception of man. The second lecture, "On Changing the World," is about injustice, its roots in inequality of power, and the failure of scholars and governments to deal with the true issues in these respects. There is little or no linguistics in the second lecture, just as there is little or nothing of social reality in the first. Such principled *schizophrenia* besets linguistics today; the scientific and social goals of its practitioners are commonly compartmentalized. Such an alienation from experience and social reality of one of "the many kinds of segmental scientists of man," against which Edward Sapir warned years ago, does not mirror either the true nature of language or its relation to social life (Hymes 1973, p. 59-60) [My emphasis].

What Hymes is reacting to is not the centrality of the *native speaker* as an informant for the linguist or the grammarian, but the *idealization* of the speaker that consists of an estrangement from the "real world" and, as such, a negation of empirical findings:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly [...] (Chomsky 1965, p. 3).

- 3 "There are four aspects to be sketched, concerned, respectively, with (1) the components of communicative events, (2) the relations among components, (3) the capacity and state of components, and (4) the activity of the system so constituted. It is with respect to the third and fourth aspects that two topics prominently associated with the topic of communication, communication theory (in the sense of information theory), and cybernetics, find a place" (Hymes 1964, p. 13).

This model, as abundantly commented on so far, is cut from any social consideration regarding the speaker: disembodied, extracted from any context, it seems first that this speaker stands as a completely apolitical abstraction. But it is precisely because of its idealistic dimension that the ideal speaker is a political concept, according to Hymes:

The goal of linguistic theory was stated to be an ideal speaker-listener member of a homogeneous community. In effect, linguistic theory adopted Feuerbach and rejected Marx (Hymes 1996, 189).

Hymes's plea for materialism against idealism leads to the defense of the ethnography of *ways of speaking*, a plural object that puts forward the particularity of actual language practices rather than the quest for an artificial universality:

A dominant conception of the goal of "linguistic theory" encourages one to think of language exclusively in terms of the vast potentiality of formal grammar, and to think of that potentiality exclusively in terms of its universality. *But a perspective which treats language only as an attribute of Man leaves language as an attribute of men unintelligible.* In actuality language is in large part what users have made of it. Navaho is what it is in part because it is a human language, and in part because it is the language of the Navaho. The generic potentiality of the human faculty for language is realized differently, as to direction and as to degree, in different human communities, and is useless except insofar as it is so realized. The thrust of Chomskian linguistics has been to depreciate the actuality of language under the guise of rejecting an outmoded philosophy of science. We need not now reject a modish philosophy of science, but we must be able to see beyond its ideological use and recognize that one cannot change a world if one's theory permits no purchase on it. Thus, one of the problems to be overcome with regard to language is the linguist's usual conception of it. A broader, differently based notion of the form in which we encounter and use language in the world, a notion which I shall call "ways of speaking", is needed (Hymes 1973, p. 60).

Such a position could sound paradoxical:

Difference as a safeguard of equality, and neglect of difference as a recipe for inequality: these are the paradoxes on which Hymes builds his argument (Blommaert 2000, p. 423).

In other words, the idealization of the speaker erases social inequalities, creating a form of blindness ⁴ that in fact reinforces them. By introducing the figure of the “ideal speaker-listener”, Chomsky would have opened the way for unrealistic representations of linguistic competence, thus strengthening the already existing and quite oppressive ideal goals of language teaching and language acquisition, in particular (Leung, Harris, and Rampton 1997).

Gumperz’s description of Chomsky’s work is less severe – though he agrees with Hymes to the extent that they collaborate to develop the notion of *communicative competence* within the framework of linguistic anthropology (Gumperz and Hymes 1986). Gumperz does not seem to read Chomsky in the same way as Hymes, because the idea of universality is to him more important than the stressing of differences:

A possible reason for the relative neglect of linguistic anthropologists’ findings is the failure to see the general relevance of work done with little known societies. The early structuralists saw human society as divisible into a finite number of cultures. The discovery of previously unsuspected differences in grammatical systems led to an emphasis on elements of language peculiar to each culture and to a neglect of cross-cultural similarities. It took Chomsky’s work in grammatical theory to redress this emphasis. [...] Underneath the surface diversity of grammatical patterns he finds a universal system of grammatical relationships which characterizes all languages. Diversities in human language and cognition must therefore be seen in relation to underlying universal characteristics. Although Chomsky’s grammatical analysis has aroused much controversy, the questions he has raised provide the foundation for modern linguistic research and have led to much productive investigation into grammatical processes and their relationship to the functioning of the human mind (Gumperz 1974, p. 788).

Furthermore, commenting on Hemnes (Southern Norway), Gumperz categorizes a part of the speakers’ “verbal repertoire” as their “native tongue”:

The internal social homogeneity of Hemnes is reflected in the somewhat lessened compartmentalization of the verbal repertoire. Inhabitants speak

4 I use this term to mark the proximity with the idea of *color-blindness*. See Bonilla-Silva (2013).

both a local dialect, Ranamål (R), and a standard. The former is the native tongue and the chief medium of intra-village communication (Gumperz 1964, p. 146).

Two details should be noted here: Gumperz points out the homogeneity of the “speech community” (without this being a reference to Chomsky’s model as this is in 1964) as well as stressing the fact that the “native tongue” is the non-standard part within the repertoire – a mention that does not mean that it is less formal, but rather confirms its small-scale and local status. Hence, the term *native* is not problematic, but given as a synonym for *indigenous*, and the notion of *speech community* is in fact quite close to the notion of *language community*. So it is Hymes who triggers the first wave of the politicization of the *ideal speaker*: he defends the idea that scientists should engage with the plurality of language practices in the real world rather than with an idealization of language, the ethnographic method being the best tool in that perspective.

Though he seems himself to attach a great importance to the term *native*⁵, Chomsky does in fact use various terms as synonyms, between 1957 (*native*) and 1965 (*ideal*):

The central fact to which any significant linguistic theory must address itself is this: *a mature speaker* can produce a new sentence of his language on the appropriate occasion, and other speakers can understand it immediately, though it is equally new to them.

[...]

Normal mastery of a language involves not only the ability to understand immediately an indefinite number of entirely new sentences, but also the ability to identify deviant sentences and, on occasion, to impose an interpretation on them.

[...] *each individual* is capable of understanding the language and using it in a way that is intelligible to his *fellow speakers* (Chomsky 1964, p. 7; 17) [My emphasis].

This variation in terminology points towards one clear idea: it is not the *native* in which Chomsky is interested, but rather the *competent* speaker, as he qualifies him/her. Adult, monolingual, perfectly proficient, this

5 See Chomsky [1958] (1962, 158): “The empirical data that I want to explain are the native speaker’s intuitions.”

speaker might not constitute an empirically validated model, but he/she corresponds to a Galilean idealization – an idealization following the hard sciences modelization, suppressing all negligible quantities that are a bias in the analysis. In this sense, Chomsky's disdain for practical questions in applied linguistics are quite understandable:

The generative grammar of a language, then, is the system of rules that establishes the relation between sound and meaning in this language. Suppose that the teacher is faced with the question : which generative grammar of English shall I teach ? The answer is straightforward in principle, however difficult the problem may be to settle in practice. The answer is, simply: teach the one that is correct (Chomsky, 1966, p. 593).

In the lack of any solid theory of linguistic variation, one wonders how the determination of the “correct” grammar would occur. In fact, it does occur, but in a conservative and non-reflexive way, along lines of legitimacy which have been thoroughly described by Bourdieu (2001). The terminology used in schools as well as in language sciences (apart from overt sociological studies) appears therefore as a mere reflection of basic ideologies about languages, which are themselves directly connected to social inequalities which remain unaddressed:

In much of the research on bilingualism, the notion of “balanced bilingualism” has [...] functioned as an implicit synonym for “good” or “complete” bilingualism and has been used as a yardstick against which other kinds of bilingualism have been measured and stigmatized as “inadequate” and/or “underdeveloped”. *Much of this terminology reflects the ideological bias of a linguistic theory which has been primarily concerned with the idealized competence of monolingual speakers in the speech communities of western Europe and the United States*; communities which, on the whole, have a high degree of stability, autonomy, and historicity, and possess highly codified standard languages (Martin-Jones and Romaine 1986, p. 33) [My emphasis].

It then seems that Chomsky's initial assertion about the centrality of the *native speaker* is being re-evaluated later long after the first line of critique, led by Hymes and focused on the *idealization* issue. It takes the entrance of a postcolonial era to get to a point where the *native speaker* is systematically discussed on the basis of the *ideal speaker-listener*. When Hymes, as an anthropologist, saw no problem in the continued use of the

term *native*, but reacted promptly to the epistemological option constituted by the *ideal*, postcolonial, post-structuralist and postmodern critiques in particular would conflate the *native* and the *ideal*, denouncing them as tools of political oppression (Kandiah 1998; Canagarajah 1999; Love and Ansaldo 2010).

In this perspective, the term *native speaker*, which had been left aside in Hymes's critique of the *ideal speaker*, re-emerges and draws most of the attention in the debates. The conflation of the two adjectives, *native* and *ideal*, is a crucial point in this history, as well as a key factor in the ensuing complexity and duration of the controversy. Chomsky himself stays consistently out of the polemics, which he dismisses as based on false grounds and obvious misunderstanding of his scientific project. Replying to Paikeday ⁶, he insists that any controversy surrounding the definition of *native speaker* would be meaningless:

If you want to proliferate pointless problems in this way you might go on with "society," or "culture," asking similar questions (Chomsky in Paikeday 1985, p. 97).

Similarly, when asked on an online forum ⁷ about the "discrimination" and "oppression" that is associated with "the native speaker's fallacy" (Phillipson 1992), Chomsky asserts:

I do not understand why I am mentioned at all in this connection. The "linguistic authority of the native speaker" was a truism long before I became a college student. The distinction between competence and performance – what we know versus what we do — should be a truism as well, but it has no bearing on the role of the native speaker, as far as I can see. *My notion of "native speaker" is the traditional one, adding nothing new.* I have no idea what the fallacy is supposed to be, or how these truisms might relate to oppression. I suspect there must be some serious misunderstanding ⁸ [My emphasis].

6 In this passage, Paikeday had just claimed in quite a discussable way that languages were Platonician entities that would exist independently of their speakers.

7 The forum is dedicated to "NNESTs" (Non Native English Speakers) being "TESOL" (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages).

8 Available on line: <http://nnesintsol.blogspot.co.uk/2010/03/noam-chomsky.html> Quoted by Kenneth Hyltenstam at the EUROSLA roundtable, "Is there a future for the native speaker in SLA [Second Language Acquisition] research?", Stockholm, September 7, 2011.

So Chomsky's use of the term *native speaker* would be uncontroversial, as it would simply be related to a "traditional" view – a "truism", even. If his use of the term was "traditional", it would then be a continuation of the tradition of linguistic anthropology in the United States – but Chomsky clearly built generative grammar on non-empirical grounds, and he clearly differentiated himself from the Bloomfieldian tradition that preceded him (Matthews 1993; Joseph 2002b). If his use of the term added "nothing new", it would also mean that "native" never bore any political meaning – which is a point to be discussed. Moreover, what it is questioning about Chomsky's position is that he writes extensively about politics but refuses to assign any political value to a linguistic categorization such as *native speaker*. From that perspective, one must also wonder how a life-long opponent to "imperialism" and non-democratic regimes is, when it comes to the *native speaker* debate, accused of being the conveyor of "oppressive" categorizations. Chomsky sometimes mentions social hierarchies in his linguistic work, but only to prove them useless:

We exclude, for example, a speech community of uniform speakers, each of whom speaks a mixture of Russian and French (say, an idealised version of the nineteenth-century Russian aristocracy) (Chomsky 1986, p. 17).

Chomsky seems, for once, to integrate a social component in his analysis of language – a social component which prevails in his political work (especially about propaganda). But in fact multilingualism, restrained or not by social factors, is rapidly excluded as a cognitive anomaly from the perspective of the scientific observation: if speaking more than one language, whatever social class they are associated with, the speakers would have to switch and choose between contradictory systems of rules. Therefore, in Chomsky's view, they cannot be a proper subject for the linguist. The problem is then clearly one of empiricism: we know that multilingualism is a numerical norm throughout the world (Lüdi and Py 2003), and hence an object that linguistics should seriously take into account. What would be the validity of a linguistic theory which evacuates a prevalent phenomenon as data noise that could be suppressed without any heuristic loss? This thorny epistemological issue had been seen by Coulmas in the book he edited in 1981 – the first book that was mainly devoted to the notion of *native speaker*:

In justifying idealization as a necessary part of rational conduct in intellectual work, Chomsky (1979, p. 57) states that,

[...] when you work within some kind of idealization, perhaps you overlook something which is terribly important. That is a contingency of rational inquiry that has always been understood. One must not be too worried about it.

Is variation in language one such terribly important thing which was overlooked by idiolect grammars based on introspective evidence? Has the attempt to eliminate from the analysis non-pertinent factors led to the exclusion of a very pertinent, even essential factor? Is the homogeneity postulate a caricature rather than an idealization? Clearly, these questions epitomize a major methodological clash in contemporary linguistics (Coulmas 1981b, p. 16).

2. NATIVE AS A POLITICAL CATEGORIZATION

Except for a few remarkable exceptions, the native speaker in French-speaking linguistics (*locuteur natif*) does not generate as much literature as it has in English-speaking linguistics. Discussing the modalities of field-work in descriptive linguistics, especially in urban contexts in Africa, Renaud (1998, p. 258) wonders why such an empty category can meet so much success, being widely used in scholarship as well as in ordinary speech:

Il faut essayer de comprendre pourquoi une catégorie dont chacun s'accorde à reconnaître qu'elle ne correspond à rien « dans la réalité » continue sa carrière envers et contre tout dans les discours savants et ordinaires.

The French translation by Michel Braudeau of *Syntactic Structures* (Chomsky 1957) was published in 1969: the term *native speaker*, that appears twice in the original text, is translated as “locuteur indigène” (*indigenous speaker*), a choice that emphasizes the ethnical connotation of “native”. Further in the text (p. 17), “any speaker of English” is translated as « n’importe quel locuteur anglais », which means in fact “any English speaker” and therefore confuses nationality with language; the same expression is translated further (p. 103) as « tout anglophone », which means “any anglophone” and hence constitutes a more accurate choice. In 1970, Delaveau & Kerleroux publish a paper called “Terminologie linguistique” which appears as a methodic attempt to define terms such as

distribution, grammaire, morphème, phonème, rapports syntagmatiques et paradigmatiques. *Grammaire* receives this comment: « La grammaire d'une langue est cet objet abstrait à quoi obéissent tous les locuteurs natifs adultes de cette langue, qu'ils soient ou non analphabètes. » The definition here is clearly based on Chomsky's work, which the authors had apparently read in English – and their use of the exact copy “locuteur natif” reflects the main practice in French until now. A review of *Syntactic Structures* constitutes an isolated case of repetition of the term “locuteur indigène”:

L'objectif fondamental de son analyse linguistique est de « séparer les suites “grammaticales” qui sont des phrases de cette langue des suites “agrammaticales” qui ne sont pas des phrases de cette langue et d'étudier la structure des suites “grammaticales”, c'est-à-dire des suites acceptables par un locuteur indigène » (Ters 1970, p. 39).

What this variation in terminology and translation shows is that clearly no question was raised in the French context about the semantics of *native*.

In English on the contrary, the homonymy between *Native* and *native* has given the opportunity to certain critics, such as Butcher (2005) to claim that *nativeness* was a colonialist categorization, and *native speaker* a symbol of oppression:

[...] from the seventeenth century on, *natives* designated those peoples conquered, ruled, and looked down on by the British empire. The natives were the vanquished. [...] “*native*” [...] has been used over the centuries to describe the enslavement, denigration, and segregation of “other” people and countries. The adjectival entries [in the Oxford English Dictionary] for *native* also reflect this unenlightened semantic bias. When a word with this sort of divisive, demeaning history turns up in the phrase *native speaker*, all kinds of negative associations attach themselves to its use and threaten to further divide person from person and country from country. The repression of minorities to create and sustain a national identity must surely be considered a part of the old world order, worth remembering only to ensure that we take a new course in the third millennium, a course where everyone belongs (Butcher 2005, p. 20).

From her perspective, *native* is opposed to *national*, the “natives” being denied the right to constitute a nation of their own, or to belong to the majority national group. It is an analysis that diverges from the idea that *nativeness* is the core of the notion of nation: in fact, it treats *native* as a synonym of *indigenous*.

As Hackert (2012, p. 30) convincingly points out though, focusing on the negative connotation of the term *native* leaves one unable to explain how it would at the same time stand as the synonym for perfection in linguistic competence:

[...] a linguistic pecking order is established among members of a speech community, which will typically correspond to a large extent to a more general social ranking ordained by other criteria. At the top come the native speakers. Next come those who are almost native speakers but not quite. Then those who did not learn the language until adulthood. And so on. On the fringes of the community will be the hangers-on, those whose command of the language is poor or suspect (recent immigrants, foreign workers, semi-speakers, etc.) (Love 2009, p. 28).

It is actually this latter conception for which Chomsky's critics assign blame: the native speaker would refer to a social ideal which would nurture oppressive social hierarchies. In other words, a theoretical model would have met a mainstream stereotype, reinforcing its power and creating more inequality. This, then, is the meeting point between critics of the notion of *ideal speaker* and of *native speaker*. The externalist theory of *competence* (ethnography of communication, ethnomethodology, membership categorization analysis, interaction) and the deconstruction of *ethnicity* as an essentialist category (studies of multilingualism, critiques of ethnocentric approach, imperialism, postcolonialism) both plead in favour of an empiricism that would put away the rationalist idealization created by Chomsky. In France, a critique of Chomsky's epistemology has been carried out by Auroux (1998), who explicitly points to the limitations of an internalist approach:

[Les sciences cognitives contemporaines développent l'idée que] [l]e phénomène cognitif (son fonctionnement, comme son explication) relève de l'individu, ou encore, la connaissance est localisée dans l'individu. [...] Il ne faut pas sous-estimer l'avantage heuristique de cette hypothèse : elle permet de réduire la théorie de la connaissance à celle des activités d'un sujet (la subjectivité transcendantale kantienne, ou, plus trivialement, quelques performances psychologiques d'individus empiriquement choisis pour être testés). [...] On peut dire que les théories de la connaissance ont tendance à trop mettre dans la « tête » des gens et à imaginer que ce qu'il y aurait dans cette « tête » est toujours un préalable tout fait qui est la racine même des capacités

cognitives. L'homme est avant tout une structure biologique (un corps) qui interagit avec un environnement et d'autres corps. [...] On a tort de trop concéder à l'intériorité. Il est vraisemblable que la capacité de calculer n'a pas commencé simplement dans la tête des gens et qu'elle ne serait pas née sans la manipulation d'objets externes (cailloux, abaque, etc.) (Auroux 1998, p. 5).

Auroux's thorough examination of rationalism in language sciences (Auroux 1974, 1989, 1998) thus leads him to this conclusion: a rationalist approach in language sciences cannot be sufficient and empiricism should be rehabilitated and sustained by an externalist theory of cognition. Ethnomethodologists would not deny the validity of such an epistemological proposal⁹. We are then taken back to the necessity of analyzing the *native speaker* debate in a framework that is empirically supported, a way of reintroducing "realism" against the excess of rationalism:

[...] earlier accounts of the notion *native speaker* [are] less than adequate because their authors overestimate the implications of their suspicion of introspection as a method for collecting linguistic data and ignore the fact that most of the world, including the West, is actually multilingual. They also seem unaware of the debates regarding the status of indigenized varieties of English and some other European languages that almost force a redefinition of the concept. [One must reconsider this issue and offer] a more realistic and adequate definition and characterization of *native speaker* (Singh 2006, p. 489).

As mentioned above, another complication comes from the fact that Chomsky is himself very active politically, and not at all on the conservative side: quite on the contrary, throughout the last decades he has been one of the most famous opponents of imperialism and non-democratic regimes. So, how can we explain this paradox, one in which Chomsky suddenly appears as the theoretician of inequality? Blommaert underscores the fact that both Hymes and Chomsky agree politically, though choosing opposite options in linguistics:

9 "There's nothing in heads but brains... What you want to do is find yourself in the midst of [people's] lived activities," to make observable "just what they are doing that is inspectably so" (Garfinkel, 2002, p. 211, in Nevile 2009).

Hymes saw Hiroshima shortly after the bomb; the madness and scale of human rage witnessed there turned him into someone whose main concerns were peace, equality, and solidarity, a man of the left. [...] Political affinities between Hymes and Chomsky did not interfere with robust disagreements over the intellectual programs that both advocated (Blommaert 2009, p. 257-258).

Precisely, Chomsky is not concerned with communication, nor with interaction. The gap between his linguistic theory and his political views have been noted and explained on this basis: Joseph (2002a) shows that even if Chomsky talks about a speaker-hearer, presenting as equivalent the two entities that would be the speaker and the recipient of the speech, it appears that creativity is for the speaker only, the hearer being passive and mostly unable to decipher the propaganda content that is imposed on him.

3. THE COMPLEX SEMANTICS OF *NATIVENESS*

If avoiding the debate on the *native speaker* might be an option for the advocates of a self-claimed neutral modelization of the speakers, it remains unclear how far we should attempt to manipulate concepts which are in reality far from neutral:

Native-speaker identity is crucially linked to nation, race, and class; the native-speaker ideology is also connected to a number of other linguistic ideologies, such as the standard ideology (Hackert 2012, p. 30).

“Nativeness” and “standard language” (Milroy and Milroy 1999) are indeed often discussed and presented as “ideologies” proceeding from one another:

[f]or all its supposed artificiality, the standard language has come to define in ideological terms many of the realities of language and speakership with respect to imagined communities (Anderson 1991), particularly those constructed around nation-states with their attendant identities attached to “nativeness” and “foreignness” (Train 2010, p. 47).

Evidently, the history of the term *native speaker* is not exactly synchronized with the history of the notion(s) it conveys. In his searching history of the notion, Bonfiglio (2010) argues that the idea of *native speaker* fully emerges with the construction of modern *nation-states*¹⁰. It is then understandable that Alan Davies' most recent book on *native speaker* opens with an implicit reference to Benedict Anderson:

We lead our lives in *imagined communities*. We take for granted that the world is divided neatly into homogeneous groups which exhibit internal cohesion ("we are all the same") and external differentiation ("they are all different"), those axioms of nationalist movements. But internal cohesion is a fiction: we are not all the same, individuals differ. Yet the need for the imagined community is so powerful, the urge to belong so insistent, that we accept the normative constraints which require us to accommodate to common ways of behaving, common beliefs which the long process of childhood acquisition inculcates in us (Davies 2013, p. vii) [My emphasis].

Ten years after the publication of *Native speaker: myth and reality* (2003), Davies thus sums up with no ambiguity what has been claimed throughout decades of intense debates in linguistics: the idea of *native speaker* appears to be a *nationalist* ideology. From that perspective, the notion of *native speaker* is political in the sense that it underlies an ethnicized conception of the nation: a monolingual, homogeneous group of people equally sharing a stable culture¹¹. As far as the linguistic level is concerned, this mainstream representation has been regularly challenged by the empirical observation of the heterogeneity and diversity of actual language practices within groups that would be considered as national. Even so, it proves itself to be still a powerful doxa, and as such is regularly criticized outside the boundaries of the linguistic field:

10 The intellectual *horizon de rétrospection* (Auroux and Colombat 1999) that he takes into account nevertheless goes back to Latin Antiquity, as he explores the notions of *sermo patrius* and *lingua materna* (the latter being introduced by Dante).

11 See also Butcher (2005) quoting an American academic and politician of the 19th century, George Marsh, for whom the teaching of English in the United States is a crucial to the construction of the American nation (Marsh, George P., 1858, "An apology for the study of English", in *Inaugural addresses of Theodore W. Dwight, professor of law, and of George P. Marsh, professor of English literature, in Columbia college*, New York, 1 Nov., New York, Columbia University, 1859, p. 59-93).

In what sense is Islam in Europe like Spanish in the United States? In that public debates surrounding the emergence of large immigrant groups identified by religion in the one case and language in the other are emblematic of larger issues of inclusion and exclusion, which in the last instance are about identity of the hosts, of the newcomers, and, most important, of the social entities that will result from their prolonged interactions (Zolberg and Woon 1999, p. 28).

As participating actively in the deconstruction of the categories of “nation” and “native”, the political positioning of contemporary social sciences would be more accurately situated on the left side of politics rather than on its right ¹² – which is precisely the point that a few dissonant voices harshly censure, such as Khan (2013), a self-claimed “conservative” scientist and opponent to “cultural anthropology” in particular:

Privilege. Oppression. Colonialism. Patriarchy. Heteronormativity. These are terms common in modern Left thought, but they are also widely used by cultural anthropologists. In sum, *the field has become more political movement and social advocacy collective, than a scholarly enterprise*. This is not true in all cases, but it is true in enough cases that there is an unfortunate dead rot at the heart of cultural anthropology as an academic domain of inquiry. The nastiness of academic anthropology is a function of its hyper-politicized nature [My emphasis].

Is the critique of the *native speaker* a “hyper-politicized” enterprise? It is obviously possible to provide evidence that points toward a positive answer to that question – though I would preferably drop the rhetorical “hyper-” prefix, which does not sound useful nor meaningful from my perspective. Acknowledging the highly political dimension of the debates cannot, nevertheless, be seen as a sign of scientific failure. One has to take into account that politicization results from a deliberate epistemological choice – which, as such, also entails a fruitful part of reflexivity – and that it is grounded empirically. From this perspective, Blommaert (2001, p. 131) quotes Hymes when drawing attention to the issue of scholarship about language rights – a politicized movement that would often not meet scientific expectations:

12 To avoid any incorrect generalization about the social scientists’ political opinions, I should add that it would also be incorrect to assume a perfect consensus among the “left-wing” positions that could be taken, especially in sociological and anthropological linguistics.

In my view, there is a problem of quality in much work committed to language rights. Dell Hymes, a man not afraid of putting things bluntly, at one point said about American research in and on minority groups (Hymes 1996, p. 80): “[i]t is no service to an ethnic group to right the wrong of past exclusion by associating it with shoddy work”. Advocating the rights of oppressed people can only be effective if it is supported by the best possible science. Stock needs to be taken from recent scholarly developments (while old accomplishments should not be forgotten); my feeling often is that the field has moved far beyond “linguistic rights” claims now.

The work of Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas is one which is particularly discussed here (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1986; Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995). Clearly militant, this scholarship stands on the side of minorities who are perceived as straying away from the ideal culture *i.e.* Western White culture. Though pragmatically efficient to some extent, this culturalist view ends up essentializing minorities as representing the native: this idealized figure of the victim, the oppressed speaker, is the one to which scholars want to give linguistics rights – even if this enterprise is not always the best political option, as some cases have shown¹³. As righteous as this sounds, it does not lack very deep theoretical, practical and political problems – so deep that, for some scholars, the notion of linguistic rights should be abandoned, to the profit of other forms of more complex reflections on social equality and language (Stroud 2001; Wee 2010). This critique is entirely epistemological: language sciences cannot over simplify linguistic issues just for the sake of solving political problems. We are facing a paradox: while criticizing idealized linguistic models and reintroducing issues from the “real world”, some scholars actually operate another kind of idealization, placing the native and his/her authenticity in front row – the last speaker, the speaker of an endangered language, the minority speaker, the colonized speaker being just a few of

13 See Blommaert (2001) on Tanzania: switching from English (the language of colonization) to Swahili (the “native” language) has by no means helped in reducing educational inequalities, due to much more powerful social factors. “Rights are fine, only, in practice, they tend to be overruled by other factors of inequality. Declaring languages equal does not make their speakers equal in real societies, because far more than language is at play” (*ibid.*, p. 138).

the possible variations within this framework. This situation could be analysed in terms of failed politicization, one that does not avoid the traps of essentialization:

Despite the apolitical nature of his analysis, the shadow of Saussure would loom large in subsequent attempts at a political account of language. If not reacting against Saussure's idealisation of a homogeneous speech community, such accounts are likely to be based on a methodology deriving from the structuralism he is credited with founding, or to be reacting against that very structuralism (Joseph 2006, p. 64).

DE-ESSENTIALIZING THE *NATIVE SPEAKER*

If *diversity* is the obvious mode of existence of human languages (Auroux 1998, p. 168), *superdiversity* (Vertovec 2007; Blommaert and Rampton 2011) is emerging as a new term to characterize efficiently the effects of mobilities, migrations and language contacts in both a postcolonial era and a globalized world:

So although notions like “native speaker”, “mother tongue” and “ethnolinguistic group” have considerable ideological force (and as such should certainly feature as *objects* of analysis), they should have no place in the sociolinguistic toolkit itself. When the reassurance afforded by *a priori* classifications like these is abandoned, research instead has to address the ways in which people take on different linguistic forms as they align and disaffiliate with different groups at different moments and stages (Blommaert and Rampton 2011, p. 6).

In a present mindset in which anthropologists actively discuss the “danger of disembodied postcolonial theorizing” (Fabian 2000, p. xiv), the core issue seems to get rid of mainstream language ideologies that still impose their view on the study of language, a view that is unfortunately incompatible with the complexity of the material collected through the ethnography of speaking:

Boas after all spent almost his entire professional career saying “language, race and culture are three different things that don't coincide”. We keep forgetting it. Why do we keep forgetting it? We keep forgetting it, I really

think, because we live in a cultural system which constantly tries to bring them back together again, racializing language difference, languaging racial difference, culturalizing linguistic difference (Silverstein, van der Aa and Blommaert 2014, p. 7-8).

In this sense, the politicization of the *ideal* and the *native* speaker is a striking example of attempts to deal with the conflation of mainstream language ideologies and language sciences.

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