Rights to Speak: A rejoinder to ‘Theorizing the speaker and speakerness in applied linguistics’

Mike Baynham

Vignette

Around the time I was preparing to write this commentary, I attended a poetry event in Glasgow celebrating Palestinian poetry. Due to unforeseen circumstances I was asked to step in and read the English translations, unprepared, in place of a distinguished Scottish poet/translator, alongside a Palestinian poet, Iyad Hayatleh, who read Arabic originals from an anthology followed by his own poems in the language and then a short story he had written in English. The anthology contained poems from a range of Palestinian poets with translations into Standard English with occasional Scots English expressions (e.g. ‘two wee hands’) and into Scots and Gaelic and Shetlandic. All the translations I in fact read were into this occasionally Scots-inflected Standard English.

Iyad read from the anthology in the first part of the reading, and I read the English translations in my southern English accent. So far, so conventional. In the second part of the reading, however, it turned out that Iyad’s poems in Arabic were to be followed by his own translations of them into English. At this point it seemed to me rather odd that I should be reading Iyad’s own translations. So when he had finished reading the first poem and handed the manuscript over to me to read, I suggested to him that he should read the English (there having been no time before the reading to plan this). At this point, however, he indicated that he would rather not, so I carried on reading the English. After this Iyad went on to read his short story, which is an

Contact author

Mike Baynham: School of Education, University of Leeds, Woodhouse, Leeds LS2 3AR, UK.
Email: M.Baynham@education.leeds.ac.uk
Thinking about this unexpected but welcome event afterwards it seemed to me that some of the issues contained in the notion of ‘speakerness’, and indeed a related term one could call ‘speakership’, were raised here. In their paper, Pujolar and O’Rourke define speakerness as follows:

By ‘speakerness’ we understand the processes through which social actors get defined by their language practices. (p. 208)

Speakership would specifically concern the claiming of or assignation of a speaker role in a given context. Speakerness would thus be the inclusive term, with speakership an aspect of it. There seemed to be an unspoken assumption shared by all concerned, including myself, that Iyad, the Arabic speaker, would read the Arabic and that I, despite Iyad’s fluency in English and his ability to command an audience in that language – as later demonstrated in his reading of the short story – would read the English. This I would suggest is an example of a conventional assumption about speakerness, in the sense that Pujolar and O’Rourke are defining it here, as well as being a conventional assignation of roles, of what I would call speakership.

In the second part of the reading, when Iyad invited me to read his own English translation of the poem he had just read by handing me the manuscript, I felt impelled, out of the discomfort described above with reading his translations, to suggest that he should read it, again raising more explicitly an issue of speakership, or we might here call ‘readership’. However, again as noted above, he indicated that I should continue reading the English, and so I did, until the short-story reading. Following the argument in Pujolar and O’Rourke, I would say there is some subtle and not so subtle negotiation of speakerness/readerness here.

Another, perhaps subtler but interesting speakership issue is raised in my reading of the translations of the anthology (Bell and Irving 2014), described on its back cover as ‘the UK’s first major collection of contemporary Palestinian poetry, translated [...] by 29 of Scotland’s very best poets’. I felt a slight twinge of awkwardness at reading in my southern English accent, replacing as I was one of the most distinguished Scottish poets/translators and indeed reading to a Glasgow audience. Am I the right sort of speaker to be reading these poems? The implications of this are interesting, in that they suggest that questions of speakerness/speakership implicate not just the boundedness of named languages, but also other language varieties.

Running a new theoretical construct over some data is an effective way of testing and establishing its robustness and validity, ascertaining its limits and
whether it needs to be tweaked and refined. This is effectively what I have been
doing in my account of the incident above: testing out the notion of speakerness/speakership and how it works with some auto-ethnographic data of my
own. Over my research career I have increasingly discerned two metaphors for
theory: theory as a way of seeing and theory as a tool for thinking with. Theory
as a way of seeing is exemplified in Charles Goodwin's (1994) landmark paper
'Professional vision'. A given theoretical perspective enables us to see daily life
in ways that are not accessible otherwise. Just as the geologist, the archaeolo-
gist and the farmer see the land differently, so will the specialist in classroom
discourse or indeed the trained teacher discern patterns of interaction that are
not obvious in the same way to others without that formation. They will see
a classroom differently. In this sense a given theoretical perspective has affor-
dances: it provides tools that enable the observer/analyst to make sense of a
given phenomenon. At this point the account leans towards the sociocultural
perspective of theory as a tool for thinking with: it enables us to think thoughts
that would not be possible otherwise. So what kinds of ways of thinking does
the notion of speakerness and speakership afford us? To be more concrete,
how can the notion of speakerness and speakership illuminate the rather tacit
and real-time decisions that lead to the bilingual poetry reading unfolding as
it did? Does considering all this in terms of speakerness/speakership enrich
the account, and if so, how?

In order to develop their notion of speakerness, Pujolar and O'Rourke
summarize and draw on debates that have been ongoing for some
time about the legitimacy of the 'Native Speaker', and hence the research focus on World
Englishes. However, they also draw on and connect this to their more recent
research on the notion of 'New Speakers' of European minority languages. All
of these topics raise questions of what I would call 'rights to speak': Who can
be treated as a legitimate speaker of a specific language variety in a specific
context? Who has the right to speak? The New Speakers research uncovers
a number of motives as to why a particular learner might want to become
a speaker of a particular minority language, Gaelic for example. In my case,
my mother was Scottish and we trace back our ancestry to the Black Isle in
Inverness-shire, where our forebears would undoubtedly have been Gaelic
speakers. Not a trace of this remains in my family, although I have become
curious in recent years to get a feel for expressions in Gaelic, easier now that
so much signage is bilingual in Scotland. This curiosity has led to me paying
attention to occasions when I encounter Gaelic. Another example from my
language history: in my childhood exposure to Scottish culture there was
a phrase, which I heard as 'A wee Jock and Doris', imagining some cheerful
Scots couple, popular in music hall songs, who liked a drink. It was only very
recently, passing a pub on the Dumbarton Road, Glasgow called the Geoch
an Doris, that it clicked that this was a Gaelic phrase (translation: ‘a drink at the door’, i.e. a last drink). Learning such things, though there is not a trace of Gaelic left in the immediate history of my family, creates an unexpected sense of depth and connectedness.

Scots English on the other hand is closer to me, through my maternal grandparents and my mother. My grandparents spoke a standard variety of English with strong Scottish accents; my mother, however, after many years away from Glasgow, sounded English, yet retained a fund of expressions, songs and rhymes which she would repeat in Scots. A few years ago I attended a seminar given by a colleague on features of Scots English and was surprised to discover that almost all the lexical examples mentioned I had heard many years ago on my mother’s lips. This led me to conclude that, while my upbringing was almost entirely in England and my accent, as mentioned above, southern English, the former had positioned me in some way as an insider in relation to Scots English.

A more poignant example of a lost language comes from my time working in Sydney. Some years ago I attended a meeting in which Indigenous Australian colleagues at my university talked of consciously setting out to learn the language of which they had been historically deprived. One commented on her amazement, as her studies progressed, to discover that many words she had thought peculiar to her own family were in fact words in the lost language, which she and her colleagues were slowly regaining through study, in Pujolar and O’Rourke’s terms as new speakers / neofalantes.

Coming back to the poetry reading, my Scottish – specifically Glaswegian – descent gives another fillip to my self-consciousness about reading to this Glasgow audience in place of a prominent Scots poet. I take this as prima facie auto-ethnographic evidence that there is something important and substantive to the way Pujolar and O’Rourke are constructing the notion of the speaker and speakerness here: that rights to speak and to be regarded as a legitimate speaker are distributed in quite subtle and nuanced ways. Pujolar and O’Rourke use the term ‘speaker legitimacy’, and I derive the notion of right to speak from the title of Amy Shuman’s (1986) landmark book Storytelling Rights, in which she explores the metapragmatics of entitlement or how the rights to tell (and indeed to hear) particular stories are distributed in adolescent friendship groups. In a later piece, Shuman (1993: 135) writes of entitlement:

> In exploring the interaction of competing voices, the concept of entitlement is as fundamental as that of turn-taking. Indeed the conventions of turn-taking depend upon conventions for defending or determining the right to speak at all. If ‘a speaker’s right to be sole talker is a claim to a turn of talk’ (Moerman, 1988:19), entitlement concerns the right to make that claim. Challenges to entitlement raise questions about the ownership of talk as well as, by implication, the ownership of experience.
Indeed, entitlement as expounded here is very relevant to many of the scenarios Pujolar and O’Rourke report, where there is some kind of resistance to new speakers / neofalantes on the part of ‘heritage’ speakers of languages such as Galician, Occitan or Gaelic – i.e., those who had learnt the language from infancy. It seems to me that many of the issues raised in the present paper concerning speaker and speakership come down to questions of legitimacy or entitlement: who has the right to speak (and of course write) what to whom in what context?

Pujolar and O’Rourke connect their discussion of the speaker and of speakership to a number of salient sociolinguistic and applied linguistic themes – most prominently perhaps that of minority language revitalization, but also using their analysis to connect the othering of the non-native speaker in the language learning-context with the othering of minority languages and dialects in relation to the dominant and typically national language, providing a brief historiography of this. They also connect the problematic of the speaker and speakership to Foucault’s (1984) formulation of the production of the self in discourse as a way of discussing the becoming of the new speaker. This suggests to me a further connection with Bakhtin’s (1981: 346) notion of ideological becoming:

Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values.

So what is the struggle in becoming a new speaker? Perhaps it lies exactly in the resistance or speaking back to the dominant discourses and language ideologies that Pujolar and O’ Rourke allude to, choosing to identify and adhere to a language or dialect that has been marginalized. The new speaker in this way inserts themself into a struggle around language. Yet there must be a range of different investments at work here. My Indigenous Australian colleagues in Sydney were not just choosing something new; they were reclaiming something that had belonged to them and their people and that they had been historically deprived of by the violence of colonialism. In doing so they were quite literally excavating and rediscovering the origins of familiar word meanings that had been opaque to them, and thus becoming able to connect their linguistic present with a past and a lost language. In the newness of new speakerness it seems there is often a return, a going back. So what about less traceable choices, such as my decision as a community education worker all those years ago to learn Arabic? It seems that not all new speakers are motivated by historical autobiographical investments. Was I a new speaker or a language learner? Would there be any theoretical or practical advantage in considering me and other language learners like me as new speakers? On the
other hand, with my family background, if I made a move to re-engage with Gaelic I would clearly be engaged in this historical autobiographical retracing, however speculative.

If becoming a new speaker involves an insertion into a struggle around language, this can be understood in terms of ideological becoming as a speaking back to powerful normative discourses and ideologies concerning language. Returning to the notion of the production of the self in discourse that Pujolar and O’Rourke invoke, we recall that this self-production is not *sui generis*, but instead involves interpellation or hailing in the Althusserian sense (Althusser 1972 [1970]: 174) by powerful discourses and ideologies. The subject, hailed by normativities, has however the potential to resist, to speak back in the process of ideological becoming discussed above. It is interesting at this point that Pujolar and O’Rourke go on to invoke the notion of the queer subject or speaker. These processes of speaking back to powerful normativities I discuss in a recent chapter (Baynham et al. 2021)

To continue my auto-ethnographic interrogation of the speaker/speaker-ness construct, I remind myself that to be a speaker implies being an interactional participant of some sort. At this point I start to wonder whether there are different kinds of participation to consider under the speaker umbrella. At what point can one legitimately say ‘I speak Gaelic, or Arabic, or French’? There must be some kind of spectrum of speakerness. For example, I have been learning Arabic (Classical, Standard and to some extent the Moroccan *darija*) on and off in a variety of ways for nearly 40 years and, within limits, I can do all sorts of quite useful things with it, but I would never utter the words ‘I can speak Arabic’ without seriously qualifying it, whereas I am quite ready to say I speak French or Spanish. My point here is that within the ambit of speaker and speakerness must be the notion of learner and learnerness, or perhaps the processes of becoming a new speaker. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ seems relevant here: the very *new* speaker must establish some legitimate peripheral position to engage with the language. I think it would be a very interesting development of the arguments proposed here to investigate in a granular way the processes of becoming a new speaker, using an ethnographic case study approach; perhaps indeed such research is already ongoing or envisaged. Some of the studies and examples cited here suggest so. Put another way, it would be interesting to see some ethnographic studies of the emergence of new speakers. The approach described here has the potential to lead to a new and interesting angle in the field of language learning, which sheds the baggage of the tired but still pervasive native/non-native speaker dichotomy.
Conclusion

In the discussion above I have tested out the robustness of the speaker/speakerness construct using auto-ethnographic data and find it both robust and promising as a way of thinking in a fresh way about both language learning and minority language revitalization. It provides a way of thinking beyond the tired dichotomy of native/non-native speaker and a way of describing an emergent phenomenon of new speakers of European Minority Languages. As I suggest above, and as Pujolar and O’Rourke advocate in their paper, there is much benefit to be gained by applied linguistics bringing these perspectives together, and indeed the sociolinguistic framing is convincing. As explained above, extending from the work of Shuman (1986) on rights to speak and entitlement, I would suggest considering as part of the broader notion of speakerness the notion of speakership understood as the claiming or assigning of a speaker role in discourse. This would open the way to interesting granular studies of interaction where speakerness and speakership play a role. Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of ideological becoming also has potential for engaging more closely with the struggle for language as experienced by individual speakers. I think that Pujolar and O’Rourke are perceptive to align this to the experience of the queer subject/speaker, speaking back to heteronormativity. The common element is in the speaking back to dominant normativities; that is, refusing to be interpellated by them.

As I suggest, for many new speakers, like my Indigenous Australian colleagues in Sydney, becoming a new speaker is not just something new but also a looking back towards something that has been lost with a view to regaining it, so to that extent the newness of the new speaker is somewhat problematized. Could it indeed by experienced as offensive to be regarded as a ‘new’ speaker when learning a language of which one has been historically deprived? This is of course an empirical question. Terminologies evolve dialectically in response to critique, but as I read Pujolar and O’Rourke’s piece I found myself wondering if the clustering of motivations and interests under the new speaker / neofalante umbrella might require some further teasing apart.

The example with which I started this commentary, although it involved the speaking voice, was in fact reading aloud rather than speaking. Indeed, I discussed it in terms of claiming a readership role. Speaking indeed is often used as an umbrella for all the various things that we do with language. I think, however, that an interesting way to develop the research arguments presented here would be to extend the focus to look empirically at broader uses of the new language in the range of contexts in which it is implicated. The broad sociolinguistic and applied linguistic case is well made for the speaker and speakerness, and it interesting now to see how it plays out interactionally.
About the author

Mike Baynham is Emeritus Professor in the School of Education, University of Leeds. A sociolinguist by training and applied linguist by affiliation, he has recently focused his research on language, migration and multilingualism, particularly narratives of migration. His monograph with Tong King Lee, *Translation and Translanguaging*, was published with Routledge in 2019. His focus in retirement is on poetry and translation. He is currently translating the work of the Moroccan *zejel* poet, Adil Latefi. Address for correspondence: School of Education, University of Leeds, Woodhouse, Leeds LS2 3AR, UK. Email: M.Baynham@education.leeds.ac.uk

References


