What does it mean to be a legitimate speaker?  
A rejoinder to ‘Theorizing the speaker and speakerness in applied linguistics’

Claire Kramsch

When in 1980 the journal Applied Linguistics published in its inaugural volume two articles that were to become foundational for a new approach to teaching foreign languages – in issue 1, Canale and Swain’s ‘Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing’ (1980), and in issue 2 Breen and Candlin’s ‘The essentials of a communicative curriculum in language teaching’ (1980) – it was clear that the model for learners was no longer the disembodied linguistic system of the grammar-translation approach but the speaker of that linguistic system and its ultimate instantiation, the native speaker. While Chomsky had placed the nativeness of the ideal native speaker in the speaker’s biological make-up, Dell Hymes (1974) had placed it in the speaker’s ‘ways of speaking’ and ‘communicative competence’. Second-language acquisition / applied linguistics embraced wholeheartedly the notion of communicative competence, as it got language learners out of the dry study of grammatical and lexical structures of the language and put them in touch with living, authentic speakers. Rather than academic knowledge, the communicative approach gave learners some of the ‘usable skills’ of native speakers. But who were these native speakers and what gave them the legitimacy and the power they had acquired in applied linguistics? In recent years, globalization and the concomitant migrations into the various industrialized nation-states
have severely put into question the exclusive legitimacy of the native speaker as a model for language learners, but until now no one had looked into the case of the ‘new speakers’ of revitalized languages like Gaelic, Catalan, Welsh or Basque and their problematic legitimacy as users of these languages.

The brilliant argument made by Pujolar and O’Rourke in their article not only recapitulates the progressive demise of the native speaker’s privilege over the last 40 years; it also tackles the much more consequential issue of speakerness per se. Coming as they do from sociolinguistics and the study of minority and revitalized languages such as the aforementioned, the authors ask questions more fundamental than just those of grammatical accuracy and communicative appropriateness. Increasing ethnic, racial, social, economic and linguistic diversity, particularly in lands with histories of internal and external colonialism, makes crucial the question of who counts as a legitimate speaker. Does an immigrant to Ireland who speaks perfect Gaelic count as a native speaker, or is that privilege reserved for traditional speakers of the older generation? What is the power relationship between new speakers and traditional speakers, and, by extension, between White American English speakers and African American Vernacular English speakers in the US, or between Jewish and Arab Hebrew speakers in Israel? Similarly, would a German national and native speaker of German, but of Turkish descent and with a Turkish surname, get a job teaching German at a Goethe Institute in China? Pujolar and O’Rourke examine the colonization and racialization of the ‘native’ speaker and show how the issue of speakerness is a much larger issue than just a question of language instinct and cultural authenticity.

Speakerness turns out to be an extraordinarily fruitful notion for applied linguistics as it intersects with issues of social and linguistic normativity, standardization, nation building, internal colonialism, modernity and diversity, and the fight against inequalities of race, class and gender. It forces us to confront the very way we look at and talk about language, language users, thought and knowledge. As the pandemic has forced us to reconsider what it means to interact with one another, the spread of English around the world has revealed what colonial power really means, and internet literacy has raised questions about the very construction and power of knowledge. Similarly, language revitalization efforts have made visible the symbolic power struggles between new and old speakers, and, by extension, between literate and orate ways of speaking, between immigrants and autochtones, and between foreign-language and heritage-language learners. That symbolic power struggle between new and traditional speakers of indigenous/ethnic languages is between different views of what constitutes language and knowledge.
Two conceptions of what language is:
for traditional speakers: monolingualism, genetic heritage, patrimony, orality, morality/religion, cosmology, and a semiological universe of meaning. For new speakers: multilingualism, literacy, instrumentality, modernity, and languages revitalization.

Two conceptions of what knowledge is:
for traditional speakers: an epistemology grounded in community values, history and social structure. For new speakers: a scientific modern epistemology with claims to universality and efficiency.

The danger, as Pujolar and O’Rourke point out, is that while languages are revitalized, the epistemologies of traditional speakers get colonized by the dominant ideologies of the day. What is needed, they argue, citing Leonard (2017: 19) is ‘a renewed engagement in “language reclamation” that incorporates “community epistemologies” to effectively decolonize indigenous communities ideologically’ (p. 217).

Viewing the language-teaching enterprise as a form of linguistic and epistemological ‘internal colonialism’ forces us to ask fundamental questions about what we are teaching languages for. Is it really to understand speakers of other languages on their own terms, or is it to better appreciate our own (superior?) way of speaking? Is it out of an orientalist kind of exoticism or is it to reclaim different ways of thinking and making meaning? Pujolar and O’Rourke are not out to deflate the idealism of new speakers of minority languages, nor, by extension, the praiseworthy efforts of speakers of any language to learn the language of the Other. Rather, they strive to show that speakerness is not just the power and the ‘right to speak’ in a grammatically correct and appropriate way, and to ‘impose reception’ (Norton 2013: 48, citing Bourdieu 1977: 75); it is the power to be accepted as a legitimate speaker, to be not only heard but also listened to, respected, and taken into account (Kramsch 2021). And that legitimacy, the authors remind us, ‘does not rely on fixed universal properties or criteria; but on the logics of each local linguistic market in which the overall availability of linguistic resources determines what practically counts as linguistic capital’ (p. 215). This is precisely what is at stake in what Pujolar and O’Rourke call ‘the structuration of social relations through linguistic processes’ (p. 223).

This is where this article presents a radical departure from traditional ways of considering language teaching. Despite recent ‘turns’ in applied linguistics – translingual practices (Canagarajah 2013), translanguaging (Li Wei 2018), multilingual pedagogies (Cenoz and Gorter 2015), multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis 2000), critical pedagogies (e.g., Gounari 2020) – practitioners still view speakers as mere enacters/performers of predetermined linguistic
systems, and multilingual speakers as mere polyglots. They view speakers as engaged in performance, not performativity (for the distinction between the two, see Pennycook 2007: chapter 4). They do not view them as creators of social life, architects of speaker legitimacy and builders of mutual trust and understanding through linguistic processes (Kramsch 2021). The clash between new and traditional speakers dramatizes the constitutive nature of language – not just a tool for communicating ideas about the real world, but a medium that constructs the very world that it talks about.

One could fruitfully link the Pujolar and O’Rourke article to the theory of language materiality proposed by the linguistic anthropologists Jillian Cavanaugh and Shalini Shankar. As they explain, the notion of language materiality is a way of explaining the relation of the linguistic and the material in the construction of both meaning and value (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017). It shows how the physical, sensory, affective aspects of language combine with its linguistic aspects to create not only linguistic meaning but aesthetic and moral value. This can happen because the material elements of linguistic structure such as accents, lexical elements, registers and styles of language may undergo objectification processes and become icons of and metaphors for a speaker’s character, race, ethnic origins or political leanings. Accents, lexical choices and pragmatic strategies rely heavily on language ideologies that give them semiotic meaning and invoke the dynamics of power that enable their subsequent circulation. Thus a new speaker’s foreign accent can signify for traditional speakers either a confirmation of their own cultural legitimacy and thus be well-received, or a danger of colonization and thus be perceived as a threat. Similarly, a speaker’s choice of words can index his or her social origin, level of education or political opinions and grant his/her words legitimacy or not, depending on the context in which they are spoken and the power relations between speakers. Tone of voice, register, accent are material aspects of language to the same extent as penmanship, font or modality, and choice of communication technology.

Drawing on a larger geopolitical context, the two authors have also shown how, for example, the 2011 revolutions in the Middle East, especially the Egyptian revolution centered in Tahrir Square, ‘relied heavily on numerous material communicative forms such as signs and banners, and burgeoned via social media sites, email, and mobile technologies, which provided running updates about locations and tactics’ (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012: 364). They note how the anticapitalist demonstrations encompassed in the Occupy Wall Street movement were marked by the materiality of microphones replaced by embodied communication in the form of human megaphones:

What is shared across these cases is a focus on the form of language as key to its value and shifting location within economic structures and processes. The materiality of form, whether it is entextualized in authoritative texts, is aurally monitored by various types
of listeners, or takes the shape of language varieties deemed authentic or inauthentic by experts, **has a concrete presence in the world, distinct from the nondurable nature of most interactional language.** This concrete presence, in turn, depends on the iconicity and increased fixity of linguistic form, such that only certain texts, accents, and speaking styles are transformed into commodities and become eligible to circulate. […] In all these cases, *global economic and political structures are mediated through local linguistic and material practices.* […] Retaining analytical divisions between language and materiality may elide the identification of such *interacting processes of value formation and the production of meaning.*

(Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012: 364, emphases added)

By learning minority and ancestral languages, new speakers are confronted with the historicity and the materiality of those languages. They have to give legitimacy to both the local and the global economic and political structures these languages mediate. Thus, the notion of speakerness lies at the intersection of the universal and the particular. While new speakers help the language survive, grow and spread beyond the narrow spatial and temporal scales of its traditional speakers and make it recognized and valued on a universal scale, they have to reinvent for its speakers a new particularity without which there can be no meaning or value. Whether this particularity is expressed through language, food or other cultural practices, the challenge for new speakers, as Nancy Hornberger (2017: 175) puts it, is ‘to seek to open and sustain multilingual intercultural spaces of Indigenous language reclamation’. In this sense, the process of language reclamation for minority languages should be of great interest to teachers of languages other than English who are being marginalized around the world by the overwhelming material presence of English as a global language.

**About the author**

Claire Kramsch is Emerita Professor of German and affiliate Professor of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include the teaching and learning of foreign languages and cultures, multilingualism and the use of language in social contexts. Her most recent book-length publication is *Language as Symbolic Power* (2021, Cambridge University Press). Address for correspondence: 1201 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94709, USA. Email: ckramsch@berkeley.edu

**References**


