We are very grateful to the journal editor and to the colleagues who took up the invitation to discuss our essay. We are particularly happy to see the ways in which some of the responses explore the implications of our argument for *speakerness* in relation to issues not directly addressed in our text. In some cases these reflections align with points that we had in fact explored in earlier drafts but which had to be sacrificed for reasons of space. All four rejoinders share a concern with linguistically based inequalities, and generally concur with our overall portrayal and historicization of the contentions around ‘new speakers’ and ‘non-native speakers’. The core issue under discussion is the construct of ‘speakerness’ itself. The key questions that we need to ask are the following: is this construct really necessary here and now?; and can we address language-based inequalities just as well without it?

We will use this opportunity to frame our original discussion in a wider context. In our discussion paper, we focused on the strategy of building connections between concerns amongst European language minorities and debates in applied linguistics. We also sought to historicize the contentions on speakerness within wider processes of colonial domination and capitalist expansion in the modern period. However, this does not fully explain how (if at all) speakerness gives more coherence to the argument. Why not stick to, say, ‘speaker status’? Or ‘speaker legitimacy’? Such terms are already familiar, they do not require new wordings, and the argument could potentially have been expressed just as well.
Overall – and here we address in part Enric Llurda’s concerns – our agenda was not to put forward ‘speakerness’ as an alternative to ‘new speaker’, ‘non-native’, ‘semi-speaker’, ‘L2/LX user’ or just ‘user’. We see ‘speakerness’ rather in connection with notions such as ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’, ‘disability’ and the specific meanings that terms such as ‘race’ or ‘class’ have acquired over the past decades. If we consider the meanings, uses and historicities of these terms we come to realize that they invariably appeared to address specific social categories in need of problematization and politicization. Indeed, they are not just academic terms, but instruments of mobilization associated with specific forms of subalternity.

Speakerness, to us, projects both an intellectual ambition and a political stance that can be summed up in two points. First, we propose a radical departure from the foundations of linguistics, namely with the idea that linguistic research should be centred on an object such as ‘language’. Again, this does not quite follow the trajectory of some of the key formulations produced in sociolinguistics, such as ‘repertoire’, ‘multilingualism’, ‘languaging’, ‘translanguaging’ or even ‘heteroglossia’ or ‘discourse’. The idea is rather to shift the focus towards the subject, in this case the linguistic subject or the speaker. Second, we claim that linguistic subalternity should be fully inscribed in debates on intersectionality, and hence it should first and foremost be positioned in relation to the critiques and mobilizations over forms of subjection and subordination based on gender, disability, race etc. as highlighted above.

In relation to linguistics as a field, the issue relates to effectively overcoming the limitations imposed by a paradigm that is based on the idea that language is a self-defining object, innate and ontologically separate from its expression in social activity. This conception has implications that continue to haunt sociolinguistics and applied linguistics no matter how much we deconstruct our concepts, as Claire Kramsch observes. Llurda also acknowledges a certain frustration with the fact that the field of language learning has remained generally impervious to over 20 years of critique in relation to ‘native speakerism’ as applied to questions of quality of teaching or the definition of targets and evaluation criteria. Indeed, even after the success of concepts such as ‘sociolinguistic competence’, ‘repertoire’, ‘variety’ or ‘code’, or the improvements in the visibility and representations of gender and racial diversity in the classroom, the fundamental logic of language teaching, evaluation and testing remains largely unchanged. Kramsch specifies that the field remains locked in a conception of learning as ‘the repetition of a predetermined performativity’ rather than the enabling of ‘new performances’ on the part of learners.

Sociolinguistics has long struggled to solve the tensions imposed by the idea of language as a fixed and narrow ideal model, an eminently Eurocentric ‘universalism’. Saussure’s (1995 [1916]) much-quoted schema of what constitutes communication reduced the process to the ‘phonation’ and ‘audi-
tion’ of ‘signs,’ a process in which speaking subjects were presented as empty vessels. As such, the Saussurean language-as-abstraction has to a large extent continued, with somewhat less engagement around material and embodied language practices. So far, we have not fully contested his distinction between what is ‘linguistic’ and what is ‘social’ or pragmatic, while we remain trapped in a conceptual spider web in which ‘competence’ precedes ‘performance,’ and ‘language’ (langue) precedes speech or language ‘use.’ In this epistemological framework, it is of no use simply to vindicate non-native speakers or ‘World Englishes,’ as the same logic continues to operate under the new labels. As Kramsch argues, the model will always be fully external to learners and their own agency peripheral to the purpose.

Kramsch expresses her interest in the concept of ‘speakerness’ by virtue of it being clearly compatible with a conception of language as materially imbricated. Indeed, we agree with this view, as defenders of the materiality of language also assume a contextually/situationally informed idea of meaning making. To us, this is the core principle that enables agency, by making the speaking subject visible in a situated act of communication that is inherently responsive (i.e. a response to others which is in itself in wait of responses). This is also implicit in Bakhtin’s dialogical conception of communication, in which speaking subjects and their material embodiments (voices, accents) of semiotic resources co-construct each other in open-ended ways (Bakhtin and Holquist 1986; Voloshinov 1986).

Attention to social subjects as they emerge out of and develop social formations is central to us. ‘Speakerness’ points to the need to understand how social actors construct themselves and are constructed through linguistic means and resources as much as they may also be subjectifying/ied through sexual adscription, colour of skin and other embodied dispositions. Sociolinguistics and applied linguistics have been paying attention to these aspects since their beginnings, particularly through the elaboration of the concept of ‘identity.’ However, if we compare our disciplines with gender studies, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, racism studies and the like, these have predominantly focused on the concept of ‘subjectivity.’ The productivity of the latter perspective, arguably derived mainly from how Judith Butler (1990) appropriated Foucault, seems to have been far greater. Additionally, the development of the idea of intersectionality has allowed for a high degree of cross-fertilization within the different branches of ‘subjectivity’ studies. Sociolinguistics, however, seems to have remained in the margins of this conversation, and correspondingly with the ways in which scholarly work feeds into social activism and social movements. Jacqueline Urla (2012), in her excellent book on Basque language activism, observes that
mention of struggles to redress language domination has been strikingly absent from the lively discussions taking place today about the nature of social movements, power, cultural activism, neoliberalism, and structured forms of inequality. […] The result has been that language-revitalization struggles, the inequalities they address, and the particular kinds of discourses and strategies they deploy have yet to become fully appreciated or integrated into more general scholarly theorizing about multiculturalism, human rights, and strategies of collective protest. (Urla 2012: 6)

In short, we see the focus on ‘speakerness’ as eventually enabling sociolinguistics to take part more fully in intersectionality debates, hand in hand with colleagues across the social sciences who participate in struggles over inequalities. From this perspective, a number of points made by our colleagues can clearly be seen as contributions that go in this direction. Thus, Li Wei has used the occasion to explore how speaker categorizations have featured in his own life and have affected him and his family. Like for many of us, full-time paid academics, such stories need not always be painful as long as we have the means and the room to manoeuvre out of the traps in which others get caught and suffer negative consequences. In any case, his conclusion is eminently relevant, namely that there is some form of ‘white speaking subject’, something akin to the normative native speaker of powerful speech communities, and more specifically a ‘white listening subject’ that determines how deviant linguistic subjects are categorized. His reflection draws from the recent arguments of ‘raciolinguistics’ about the ways in which language is mobilized to produce racial othering. Beyond the specific interest of the production of such ghostly language varieties that may sometimes exist only in the ears of those who hear them, we understand Li Wei’s term as drawing on the figure of the White Male Heterosexual that has constituted the specific construction of the dominant normativities addressed by intersectionality studies.

Mike Baynham, on the other hand, observes in his rejoinder that the notion of ‘speakerness’ raises questions that have to do mainly with ‘participant legitimacy’ and ‘entitlement’, but that the ramifications (such as the idea of ‘queer speakers’) point to the need to dig deeper. He contends that we should further explore the processes of becoming for speakers. He also queries how differently such processes may feature if applied to, say, local dialects, or the languages of one’s ancestry, or simply to ‘foreign’ languages. A pertinent question here, of course, is as to what way agency or resistance can be detected in these ‘speaker contentions’.

Indeed, the issue of language learning or appropriation as ‘a process of becoming’ is present in our text, although we finally chose not to discuss it explicitly, and this is presently being developed by colleagues such as McNamara (2019) and Kahn (2018). There is much to say about the contrasting possibilities of learning dialects as opposed to ‘languages’ that are recognized
as such. Baynham’s discussion of Scots provides for an interesting case in point. Minority languages in Europe are often ideologically in between these categories, and the authority claimed by linguists in these contentions often contributes more to obscure the problem than to explain it. Gal and Woolard’s (2001) distinction between ‘anonymity’ and ‘authenticity’ arguably sketches some of the ideological tenets that explain why dialects and languages are typically learned/embodied in very different ways. Such contrast points to the fine line to be found in some situations between ‘speaking the language’ (and hence as being ratified as a conversational participant) and ‘parodying the speakers’, and thus implying ethnonlinguistic evaluations. New speakers of minority languages must straddle this tricky boundary, which attests to their in-between-ness with regard to modern language-ideological arrangements. Non-native speakers of English, in contrast, run the risk of producing a parody of themselves, as Bhabha (1994) implies in his discussion on mimicry in post-colonial contexts.

Kramsch’s comments help us expand on this in-between-ness, observing that the conflict this creates derives from well-known contentions about modernization in postcolonial contexts. Some modern model of language and personhood emerges and threatens the legitimacy of inherited resources and dispositions that may now be constructed as ‘traditional’ or ‘anachronic’. However, ‘new speakers’ in minority contexts also help diversify the community and bring much-needed resources to it. The way forward seems to be none other than in spaces of dialogue that ensure mutual recognition and possibilities of (joint or complementary) mobilization, a process that enables the formation of a decolonial perspective.

In conclusion, we have been using the following vocabulary in our discussion: subjectivity, decoloniality, becoming, subalternity, domination, recognition, agency, performativity, materiality, intersectionality, normative and queer. We believe that this vocabulary provides the architecture to address ‘speaker-ness’. It is not a new vocabulary by any means; it has a long tradition in the social sciences. However, it is relatively recent to sociolinguistics, and particularly to the study of how linguistic diversity (multilingualism, translanguaging) features in social relations of domination and submission. The developments in gender studies, sexuality studies, race studies, postcolonial studies and so on have resonated strongly in our field. However, and most importantly, there has been little movement in the opposite direction. At present, people working in these fields have generally heard little about linguistic subalternities. We believe that ‘speaker-ness’ expresses the order of phenomena and social practices that may eventually make sense in the contexts of these debates.

We posit that sociolinguists should foster a move akin to that conventionally attributed to Collins (1990), although there were clear precedents (Moraga
and Anzaldúa 1981) and parallel moves (Crenshaw 1991). These scholars denounced the partiality of early feminisms constructed exclusively from the perspective of white middle-class women, and which were eminently blind to the conditions of oppression of women associated with other social groups.

Well into the twenty-first century, a similar argument needs to be put forward in relation to language diversity. The current ways of constructing, interpreting, resisting and confronting social inequality owe much to the way in which Judith Butler (1990) appropriated and developed Foucault’s (1983) considerations about the formation of subjects through discourse, which already contained numerous considerations on how gender and sexuality could be understood as processes of subjectification. Interestingly enough, the sources, formulations, dissemination and formulation of these works have mainly been in the English and French languages. These are precisely the global colonial languages par excellence, the speech communities for whom (mainstream) speakerness has been constructed as transparent, even when it needed to be violently inculcated.

Even Spivak’s (1988) cogent critique of the exercise of power by the (Western) intellectual leaders of critique makes no reference to the fact that this power is eminently exerted via the means of circulation afforded to intellectual production in these colonial languages. This circulation has of course always had a clear directionality from the centre to the periphery and never vice versa. This chimes with what Badwan (2021) (following Veronelli (2015) has described as an ongoing ‘coloniality of language’ whereby some languages and their speakers continue to be relegated to the margins and in certain contexts seen as ‘out of place’ or deviant (Woolard 2008). If the subaltern must really one day speak, one thing is clear: their ‘speakerness’ is something that will have to be dealt with, as much work will need to be done to clarify in which language, from which context and out of what trajectory their voice is coming. We believe that it is up to us sociolinguists and applied linguists to make this argument heard.

Endnote

1. We request permission to safely use in this context the much-misused metonymy, of the language for its speakers, again for economy of expression.
2. Thanks to Eleanor Chapman for this point.

References


