The construct of the native speaker is germane to second language acquisition (SLA) research; it underlies, and permeates, a significant bulk of SLA theory construction and empirical research. Nevertheless, it is one of the least investigated (and for that matter, least understood) concepts in the field. Even a cursory reading of the major SLA literature would not yield one readily available definition that captures the essential uses that have been made of the concept: including, but not limited to, setting the native speaker as a goal or a model for SLA or using the native speaker as a yardstick to measure second language knowledge. As is, the concept remains assumed—based on common sense observation and intuition—rather than exposed to scientific inquiry. In this article I would like to draw attention to this pivotal yet much neglected concept by reviewing Davies (1991; 2003) on the native speaker. A by no means exhaustive account, the books outline principal parameters for considering the native speaker concept, thereby providing a useful basis for further inquiry.


I Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) research, since its inception, has largely been parasitic on the concept of the native speaker. Manifestations of such dependency are particularly acute in product-oriented approaches to SLA research whose mission is, typically, to examine the quantity and quality of second language (L2) knowledge. As Davies (2003: 180) aptly notes:

> SLA research has always been more interested in the native speaker than in language proficiency. In particular it has compared native-speaker behavior and that of various second language learners, asking the question: What does the second language learner know and to what extent does this differ from what the native speaker knows?

Few would deny that Davies does herein capture a fundamental concern of SLA research, that is, whether or not (adult) L2 learners can achieve linguistic competence that is indistinguishable from that of a native speaker. In the SLA literature, it is not an uncommon assertion that ‘very few L2 learners appear to be fully successful in the way that native speakers are’ (Towell and Hawkins, 1994: p. 14).

But what does the term native speaker mean? Do theoretical linguists, SLA researchers, sociolinguists, etc. share the same conceptualization thereof? Is the native speaker a reasonable goal for adult L2 learners? These and many other related questions are some of the issues SLA researchers need, at minimum, to have some understanding of if they wish to apply the concept properly and correctly to their various research concerns.

Davies’ (1991; 2003) books are entirely devoted to the subject of the native speaker. Through primarily a sociolinguistic approach, he discusses varying senses of native speaker: including the native speaker as a myth, as a reality, as a creature of blood and flesh and as an ideal. His 1991 book, entitled *The native speaker in applied linguistics* contains nine chapters, which, following an introduction (Chapter 1), deal, respectively, with ‘Psycholinguistic aspects of the native speaker’ (Chapter 2), ‘Linguistic aspects of the native speaker’ (Chapter 3), ‘Sociolinguistic aspects of the native speaker’ (Chapter 4), ‘Lingualism and the knowledge of the native speaker’ (Chapter 5), ‘Communicative competence aspects
of the native speaker’ (Chapter 6), ‘Intelligibility and the speech community’ (Chapter 7), ‘Who is the native speaker’ (Chapter 8) and ‘Judgments’ (Chapter 9). In his 2003 book, entitled The native speaker: myth and reality, he extends his 1991 version by incorporating, inter alia, two new chapters: ‘Losing one’s language’ and ‘Assessment and second language acquisition research’. In both versions, Davies not only discusses theoretical issues but applied ones as well, thereby bringing the concept of the native speaker home.

Given the almost identical nature of the two versions and that the later version expands on the earlier one, my focus in this article will be on Davies (2003). In lieu of a chapter-by-chapter review, I begin by summarizing Davies’ position on a number of questions, which, based on my intuition, would be of interest to readers of Second Language Research. I then offer a discussion of some issues arising from Davies’ view on the native speaker, and raise further questions for future consideration. Such an approach, I must nevertheless concede, necessarily skirts some arguments that the author deems important and may even present a biased view of the book; however, by the same token, it allows for a more focused discussion.

II The myth and reality of the native speaker

Davies suggests that “to be a native speaker means not to be a nonnative speaker” is the only possible operational definition one can give of the native speaker concept. This is so because it is easier to define a nonnative speaker than to define a native speaker, and:

It is in this sense only that the native speaker is not a myth, the sense that gives reality to feelings of confidence and identity. They are real enough even if on analysis the native speaker is seen to be an emperor without any clothes. (2003: 213)

Myth and reality are the two dimensions that Davies (2003) seeks to expound, and from which he examines the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic attributes of the native speaker. Sociolinguistically, the native speaker is associated with confidence, power, authority and identity, hence a reality. Psycholinguistically, on the
other hand, the native speaker is more an icon than a real figure, hence a myth.

In addressing myth and reality, Davies grapples with many vexed questions among which are:

- How do we define the native speaker?
- Who is a native speaker?
- What sort of cognitive system is available to a native speaker when learning a first language?
- What is it that individual native speakers (i.e., ‘the blood and flesh’) know?
- What is one supposed to be a native speaker of?
- What constitutes a standard language?
- Is it possible for a late second language learner to become a native speaker?
- What should be the norm or criterion for assessing second language learners’ attainment?

A brief summary of Davies’ positions vis-à-vis these questions follows.

1. How do we define the native speaker?

On this question, Davies brings psycholinguistic, linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives to bear, making the point that the concept of the native speaker is rich in ambiguity, referring to both an ideal and a person or, put differently, to a model and an exemplar of that model. Defining the concept in a way consistent with its differing senses is thereby difficult, if not impossible. Yet what is sufficiently clear, by current understanding (held collectively by researchers from different schools of thought), is that being a native speaker is a matter of self-ascription as well as a matter of objective definition.

2. Who is a native speaker?

Everyone, Davies argues, is a native speaker of his or her own speech, dubbed ‘idiolect’; s/he is a native speaker of her/his first acquired language, and s/he can be a native speaker of more than
one language under certain conditions (e.g., adequate exposure to each language before the critical age). However, Davies also adds that “bilingual native speakers are possible in terms of linguistic competence but not in terms of communicative competence” (p. 80). This is so to the extent that bilingual children typically learn and use the two languages to serve different communicative purposes, and hence that they do not have the opportunity to acquire a full range of communicative competence.

Being communicatively competent, in Davies’ view, entails that the native speaker can (1) ‘decide what is now in use’, (2) ‘be aware of what is speakable’, and (3) ‘have a relaxed attitude towards his/her own norms’ (p. 110). In the meantime, he points out that “native speakers differ among one another in terms of their communicative competence” (p. 115).

3 What sort of cognitive system is available to a native speaker when learning an L1?

Referring to psycholinguistic research (e.g., Felix, 1987), Davies asserts that a native speaker learns one or more L1s via one cognitive system, the language-specific system. By contrast, nonnative speakers, when learning an L2, are equipped with a dual cognitive system, namely the language-specific system and the problem-solving system, even though it is largely the problem-solving system that they utilize for learning. Davies goes on to comment:

The adult [nonnative speaker] is programmed into using the [problem-solving] system because adults approach all learning tasks through their problem-solving system. It is partly the wrong system because environmental factors, which do not in Felix’ view affect the language-specific system, ‘strongly affect the operation of the problem-solving system’ (p. 165). And the fact that the adult may make use of the language-specific system in addition to the problem-solving system makes things worse, because the two systems are in competition with one another. (p. 37)

4 What is it that an individual native speaker knows?

Davies differentiates between the competence of an ideal native speaker, which only grammarians are interested in, and that of a human native speaker, noting that the ideal is a creation or abstraction from the non-ideal (i.e., the human native speaker). To
clarify the difference, he posits three types of grammar, termed respectively Grammar 1, Grammar 2 and Grammar 3. Grammar 1 is idiosyncratic, referring to what an individual speaker has in terms of his/her own language; Grammar 2 is what one individual shares with another; and Grammar 3 is the grammar of the human faculty of language, the so-called universal grammar. The three form a continuum, between the individual and the universal. Moreover, Grammar 1 and Grammar 3 are psycholinguistic in nature, which form the basis for understanding an idealized speaker, and Grammar 2 has only a sociolinguistic reality. And it is Grammar 2, Davies maintains, that should form the basis for an understanding of a human native speaker. The native speaker is, thus, largely a sociolinguistic concept, by Davies’ account, and what makes up the knowledge of a human native speaker is what s/he knows of Grammar 2, which overlaps, in part, with her/his Grammar 1, and which is in turn a reflection of Grammar 3.

As a broad delineation of the general repertoire of the native speaker knowledge, Davies suggests four types of knowledge:

1) metalinguistic, e.g., the construction ability to assemble the parts of common sentence types or texts and to recognize them;
2) discriminating, e.g., the ability to recognize what counts or what does not count as a part of the language, and to create potential additions to the language;
3) communicational, e.g., the ability to handle rules at the discourse level, in a relation of courtesy to others; and
4) skills, e.g., the ability to control all the other three types of knowledge.

There are several ways to differentiate these knowledges. One would be to view the first three as pertaining to competence and the last one performance. Another way would be to see the first type of knowledge as ‘pure’, and the remaining three types of knowledge as relating to control and proficiency. Native speakers are non-uniform, in Davies’ view; they differ from one another—perhaps most conspicuously—in terms of the fourth type of knowledge, where proficiency is most evident, and which amounts to the ability to control one’s use of knowledges (1), (2), and (3). Given
this, Davies urges the need to develop “an operational definition of minimal native-speaker ability” (p. 95). This ability – as can be inferred from his repeated discussion of language and culture – involves, at minimum, knowing “how to form grammatical sentences” as well as “knowing the conventions, the ways in which language and culture meet” (p. 98). In more formal terms, this means that being a native speaker is about having linguistic competence as well as communicative competence.

5 What is one supposed to be a native speaker of?

In approaching this question, Davies takes recourse to Haugen’s (1966) three-way definition of languages:

Languages are generally defined (a) linguistically, (b) sociolinguistically in terms of comprehension (or intelligibility) and (c) politically, in terms of attitude, identity and power. (p. 53)

Pursuing the sociolinguistic and the political dimension, Davies discusses a number of aspects of the native speaker, including speech community, language vs. dialect, language variety, standard languages, symbolic and institutional roles for language, the immigrant ethnic community, new Englishes, international English, knowledge and proficiency, and so forth. His major claims are as follows: first, individuals can regard themselves as native speakers for symbolic rather than for communicative purposes if they so wish, in order to fulfil a sense of identity. Secondly, standard languages are necessary and important and the process of standardization is an operational definition of the native speaker. “You are a native speaker if you speak a standard language” (p. 65). Thirdly, in high mobility situations – such as the immigrant ethnic community, new Englishes and the international English – being a native speaker takes on an extra significance. Following Davies’ argumentation, it is, after all, up to the individual to decide which language s/he wants to be a native speaker of. This being so, Davies also makes the point that one can be a native speaker in terms of linguistic competence, but not in terms of communicative competence or vice versa. By the same token, one can be a native speaker through self-ascription for symbolic purposes but one can
also be denied the status by members of a speech community with which one would wish to identify. After all, “the speech community is primarily built on the attitudes of its members” (p. 57).

6 What constitutes a standard language?

The notion of standard language is based on the notion of speech community, with the latter being the source of the former. Davies identifies three characteristics of a speech community:

- a group of people all of whom speak the same language;
- a group of people who share critical attitudes about linguistic communities; and
- a group of people who exist in the mind of any one individual. (p. 127)

Within this community, the first is central, and the language, which is the putative standard language, embodies what Davies refers to as Grammar 2. Being a native speaker of that language requires one, among other things, to distinguish between what belongs to one’s idiolect and what belongs to the shared language of the speech community of which one is a member. What, then, binds the different native speakers is, essentially, a set of norms vis-à-vis the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>language</th>
<th>standard/dialect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accent</td>
<td>stratification of language use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discourse</td>
<td>appropriate registers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prestige</td>
<td>appropriate pragmatic forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rhetorics</td>
<td>appropriate conversation styles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(p. 129)

These norms can either be imposed or assumed. A standard language, in Davies’ view, is more readily acquired if the norms have been assumed, due to its voluntary rather than prescriptive nature.

A standard language, maintains Davies, provides a commonality rather than homogeneity. Drawing upon Ross’ (1979) discussion of grammaticality judgements by native speakers, and his own replication of Ross’ study, Davies points out the existence of
intra-group variation, suggesting that not every native speaker is a perfect speaker of the standard language, even though some are ‘exceptional learners’. In this sense, native speakers are like nonnative speakers, among whom only a small minority can achieve very high command of the target language, and hence are ‘exceptional’, while the majority exhibits differential mastery.

Another pertinent issue Davies raises vis-à-vis the standard language construct is whether or not the standard language within a speech community may also be recognized as such outside it by other speech communities. Underlying this concern is the post-colonial and postmodern tension between old varieties of English such as British English and American English, on the one hand, and native varieties of English such as Nigerian English and Singaporean English, on the other. The rise of English as a world language challenges the concept of the native speaker by raising the question of which variety should constitute the standard. However, what matters, suggests Davies, is that “the community is confident in choosing its own solution” (p. 170).

7 Is it possible for a late L2 learner to become a native speaker of that language?

Age, Davies argues, is key to becoming a native speaker. He speculates that “there are probably some features of native speakerness which can be acquired only in childhood” (p. 84). Some of these features he has in mind are cognitive in nature—for example, the generalizing capacity—while others are culture related.

Culture, asserts Davies, is like language in that it is acquired from birth and is just as impermeable. In discussing the immigrant ethnic community, he makes the point that it is possible that early L2 learners become linguistically indistinguishable from native speakers, but it is less likely that they become so communicatively. His rationale is that these learners have missed out on “the nexus of experience which contributes essential structure and information to the native speaker and which is assimilated only in childhood” (p. 102). Clearly implied in this reasoning is that restricted input and experience is a compounding factor to what seems to be an age-related difficulty.
That native-speaker levels of communicative competence are harder to achieve by nonnative speakers than linguistic competence is repeatedly hinted at in Davies’ account of the native speaker. One interesting argument he put forward is that “the linguistic component contains fewer types to which the sentence tokens relate,” while “in communicative competence there is far more information to carry” (p. 115). It thus seems that the argument on the relative facility in acquiring one vs. the other reduces to the supposition that one contains less information than the other.

“Learning to be communicatively competent,” Davies writes:

‘means the acquisition of a set of interactional skills for language in use: these skills include relating and accommodating to others, observing pragmatic protocol, being sensitive to context as to access suitable linguistic units, performing in dialog in appropriate ways and being able to relate the on-going text (written or spoken) to the user’s own understanding of the world’. (p. 114)

For the acquisition of such a wide array of skills, Davies argues, there needs to be adequate exposure to the “cultural beliefs and knowledge which the target language bears” (p. 115), and it is precisely this kind of exposure that is wanting in SLA. As Davies notes, “for the most part the learner cannot live out the cultural routines, as native speakers can, learning them through doing, the only success s/he has is through knowledge, learning like a book” (p. 115). This, however, would be the prediction if one follows the strong version of communicative competence. With its weak version, “communicative competence reduces to appropriacy of language use in so-called normal settings” (p. 116); “it becomes the articulation of linguistic competence in situation”. As such, Davies argues, “communicative competence ceases to be the impossible requirement for the second language learner it has appeared to be” and the learning of communicative competence amounts to “the practice of interaction and the recognition of appropriacy”(p. 115).

Thus, Davies’ stance that communicative competence is the most difficult to acquire gradually softens and, in fact, following an examination of the grammatical intuitions by nonnative speakers in his own study and in Ross (1979), he even argues that it is the linguistic competence that is the most difficult to acquire.
On the acquisition of linguistic competence, Davies discusses psycholinguistic arguments for and against the view that native-like attainment is not possible for late (adult) L2 learners, concurring with the claim that there are exceptional learners whose ultimate attainment is native-like. For him, these exceptional learners constitute evidence that the native speaker is as much a sociolinguistic construct as a developmental one. In sum, he argues that it is possible, but difficult, for an adult nonnative speaker to become a native speaker of an L2.

8 What should be the norm or criterion for assessing L2 learners’ attainment?

“Should the norm be, as is often claimed, the native speaker or should it be some yardstick of language proficiency” (p. 173)? This Davies discounts as a false opposition. He maintains that “there is no substitute for proficiency” and that “the native speaker must represent a model and a goal for learners of second languages” (p. 196). In his view, “The naive speaker is a fine myth; we need it as a model, a goal, almost an inspiration. But it is useless as a measure; it will not help us define our goals” (p. 197).

This being said, the native speaker can benefit from L2 testing. One can, argues Davies, take recourse to L2 tests to help describe the native speaker, and he suggests four ways to do so: the first is to obtain speech and writing samples on tests from high achievers, for example, L2 users operating in international agencies. If the data show that these nonnative speakers are native-like only in limited tasks and domains, then the conclusion can be drawn that this must be true also of subgroups of native speakers. A second way is to “use test descriptors to describe exceptional learners’ attainment in order to examine to what extent they fail to reach ultimate attainment” (p. 195). Within such descriptors, the highest scale used is often nearly the same as what one would expect of a native speaker. A third way is to “use test data to chart language separation, that is performance on a test (like writing in a code) which illustrates a late stage of acceptance within a speech community of a new standard” (p. 195). Such evidence, in Davies’
view, would lend support to the claims of new English writers that the standard they are modelling is now localized. And the fourth is “to establish an acceptable local foreign language level of attainment as the norm, with the top scale approximating native-speaker proficiency” (p. 195).

By way of concluding this summary, let me return to the title of the book and again ask: what is the myth and the reality about the native speaker? For Davies, the reality of the native speaker lies in its association with ‘membership’. The native speaker in reality, as Davies sums it up, should have the following attributes:

The native speaker is relied on to know what the score is, how things are done, because s/he carries the tradition, is the repository of ‘the language’. The native speaker is also expected to exhibit normal control especially in fluent connected speech (though not of course in writing), and to have command of expected characteristic strategies of performance and of communication. A native speaker is also expected to ‘know’ another native speaker, in part because of an intuitive feel, like for like, but also in part because of a characteristic systematic set of indicators, linguistic, pragmatic and paralinguistic, as well as an assumption of shared cultural knowledge. (p. 207)

The native speaker in myth, that is, the idealized native speaker, on the other hand, should have the following characteristics:

1) The native speaker acquires the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker in childhood.

2) The native speaker has intuitions (in terms of acceptability and productiveness) about his/her Grammar 1.

3) The native speaker has intuitions about those features of the Grammar 2 which are distinct from his/her Grammar 1.

4) The native speaker has a unique capacity to produce fluent spontaneous discourse, which exhibits pauses mainly at clause boundaries (the ‘one clause at a time’ facility) and which is facilitated by a huge memory stock of complete lexical items (Pawley and Snyder, 1983). In both production and comprehension the native speaker exhibits a wide range of communicative competence.

5) The native speaker has a unique capacity to write creatively (and this includes, of course, that s/he is literate at all levels from jokes to epics, metaphor to novels).

6) The native speaker has a unique capacity to interpret and translate into the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker.
Disagreements about an individual’s capacity are likely to stem from a dispute about the Standard or (standard) Language. (p. 210)

Clearly, not all these characteristics are present in every individual native speaker; rather, they are distilled from the whole population of native speakers. Both the myth and the reality, argues Davies, contribute to the robustness of the concept.

III Discussion

Davies’s account of the native speaker, as he himself notes upfront, is largely speculative. His goal is to outline parameters and to provide a source of hypotheses for further research on the construct, which, I think, is met to a good extent. Indeed, the book seems to have provided more food for thought than an adequate answer to the difficult and complex question of what is a native speaker. For one thing, it urges the reader to think further about the ambiguity residing in the construct.

Given, as Davies suggests, the myth and the reality surrounding the native speaker, how are we to distinguish them, theoretically and empirically? What useful theoretical or practical purposes does each serve? What brings about the myth? What explains the gap between the myth and the reality? Can a myth become a reality and vice versa? If so, which processes would allow that to happen? Or does the dichotomy of the myth and the reality create yet another myth?

With its sociolinguistic orientation, the bulk of Davies’s book is dedicated to exploring the variables that make up the sociolinguistic dimension of the native speaker. As a result, the psycholinguistic dimension is only tangentially discussed. But for the majority of SLA researchers, an understanding of the latter is equally if not more important. Thus, for them, this book only provides a partial account of the native speaker.

Although the sociolinguistic and the psycholinguistic perspectives conflict at times, both are necessary to an understanding of the construct. As Davies himself notes:

Although both [psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic] views concern control of the standard language, they are probably not reconcilable. But why should they be?
The concept ‘native speaker’ is used entirely appropriately in these quite different ways. It is probable that what is most enduring about the concept has nothing to do with truth and reality, whether or not individuals are native speakers; what matters most is the enduring native-speaker myth combining both knowledge and identity; in that myth the two views have an equal role. (p. 185)

Knowledge and identity in this conception represent different realms of concern respectively for psycholinguists and sociolinguists. This being so, one would like to know what exactly is embodied in the knowledge. Davies is quite fuzzy on this. His Grammar 2 is a useful metaphor in that it sets apart an individual’s idiolect from his/her shared ‘lect’ with others: the so-called ‘standard language’, but without at least giving its major parameters, it does little beyond creating another myth. Merely asserting that the knowledge is linguistic as well as communicative and cultural is not taking us beyond our current understanding. For many SLA researchers, the concern lies not only in the content of Grammar 2, but also in how Grammar 2 develops. Again, Davies leaves this issue almost intact, even though he conceives that “the native speaker is a developmental as well as an attainment concern” (p. 173).

1 L2 ultimate attainment

Although little attention is given to the psycholinguistic perspective, in discussing whether native-like attainment is possible in adult SLA, Davies does refer to some recent psycholinguistic arguments on a long-debated SLA issue, ultimate attainment. His position leans towards that of Bialystok (1997: 134):

The documented cases of perfect mastery of a second language achieved by late learners are not anomalous exceptions to a biological law or extraordinary facts by rare individuals with an unusual and prodigious talent. Rather, they are quite ordinary occurrences that emerge when conditions are favorable.

There are, however, issues one can take with such a stance. First of all, can it be granted that perfect mastery of an L2 is something of ‘quite ordinary occurrences’? What empirical evidence is there to support it? Secondly, how does such a stance justify numerous SLA studies showing that learners are not able to fully acquire aspects of an L2 in spite of their ability, opportunity and
motivation to learn and acculturate into the target society (see, e.g., Schmidt, 1983; Lardiere, 1998; 2000; Han, 2003; 2004; Long, 2003)? Thirdly, what conditions would enable a perfect mastery? Last but by no means least, what counts as ‘perfect mastery’?

This last issue takes us right back to the heart of the concern of Davies’ book, the native speaker. Is ‘perfect mastery’ equated with being a native speaker? If so, which native speaker: in myth or reality? If it is the former, is this possible in SLA, given its rarity even among native speakers? If it is the latter, which native speaker, given, as Davies mentions, that native speakers differ from each other in types and abilities (for psycholinguistic arguments, see also Chaudron, 1983; Sorace, 1996; for sociolinguistic arguments, see Modiano 1999)?

An observation that one can make of Davies’ discussion of L2 ultimate attainment is that he takes the evidence of native-like acquisition of linguistic competence by exceptional learners to indicate that these learners have an equal mastery of communicative competence, thereby concluding that it is possible but difficult for late learners to become native speakers. This generalization is quite unjustified. For one thing, none of the studies he cites in support of his view, with the exception of Ioup et al. (1994), actually tap into the subjects’ communicative competence. The Ioup et al. study involved quite extensive testing of an adult, Julie, who appeared to have acquired native-like proficiency in Egyptian Arabic in a naturalistic environment. In spite of the results showing that Julie had attained a native level of proficiency in perceptual abilities, production skills and underlying linguistic competence, Ioup et al. nevertheless cautioned:

[If] it is in the domain of discourse syntax and semantics that nonnative speakers fail to reach native norms, then more testing . . . needs to be done in this area before we can evaluate how nativelike their internalized grammar is. (p. 91)

Tests of a wider scope are needed, as they suggested. This, however, by no means attests to the claim that Davies makes:

The differing positions of the psycho and the socio . . . are probably irreconcilable. For the psycho no test is ever sufficient to demonstrate conclusively that native speaker and nonnative speaker are discrete: when nonnative speakers have been shown to perform as well as a native speaker on a test, the cry goes up for yet another test. For the socio there is always another (more) exceptional learner
who will, when found, demonstrate that (exceptional) learners can be equated to native speakers on ultimate attainment. (p. 213)

Rather, the argument for more tests by ‘the psycho’ (i.e., researchers having a psycholinguistic perspective) is founded on the observation that every L2 learner is able to achieve some competence indistinguishable from that of the (idealized) native speaker. The question is to what extent this is so, and in which domain(s).

The difference between the psycho and the socio as Davies describes above should not, in any way, be interpreted as a difference in the threshold of acceptance for meeting the criterion of the native speaker, namely that one has a lower threshold than the other. Rather, the difference stems from their underlying concerns; the psycho is primarily concerned with linguistic competence, whereas the socio is concerned with communicative competence. Linguistic competence, as Davies himself notes, is more complex than communicative competence; “proficiency, communicative competence, and linguistic competence represent a gradient of difficulty” (p. 196).

Another observation one can make of Davies’ discussion of L2 ultimate attainment is that he uses the term ‘ultimate attainment’ in the same way as one would use it for first language acquisition, that is, that ‘ultimate attainment’ equals mature, native-like attainment. This is challengeable. L2 ultimate attainment, as Birdsong (in press) recently reiterates, “is not to be misunderstood as suggesting nativelikeness. Rather, it refers to the end point of SLA, irrespective of degree of approximation to the native grammar.” Han (2003; 2004) provides a view of L2 ultimate attainment as characterized by inter-learner and intra-learner differential success. On the inter-learner level, she argues that “learners, instead of arriving at an identical terminal state of inter-language competence that is short of the target, may end up with differential terminal interlanguage states in which they have successfully covered varying distances towards that target” (Han, 2003a: 106). On the intra-learner level, an individual L2 learner may fully acquire some aspects of the target language, but not others; “the existence of such kind of intra-learner variation is suggestive of differential ultimate attainments within an individual
learner’s system . . . with some subsystems successfully reaching the target and others falling short of it” (p. 106). Under this view, L2 ultimate attainment is not in any sense a unitary notion, but rather it differs for individual L2 learners vis-à-vis different aspects of the target language.

The question that has been debated—more so in the last decade—is: what should be the target for L2 learners? Davies maintains, as noted earlier, that a standard language should be the target and the (idealized) native speaker should be the goal or inspiration. But still, we are left with the question of which standard language it should be, especially when multiple versions exist, as in the case of English (cf. Modiano, 1999). Should learners have a say in determining which target to pursue? Does it have to be externally imposed? Without a clear understanding of these and other related questions, the ‘comparative fallacy’ (Bley-Vroman, 1983) would only seem an inescapable reality.

2 The comparative fallacy

In a seminal paper, Bley-Vroman (1983) draws SLA researchers’ attention to their overconcern with the target language at the expense of learners’ cognitive processes, a phenomenon that he dubs the ‘comparative fallacy’. He argues:

If researchers are to make serious progress in the investigation of interlanguage, then the comparative fallacy must be avoided and attention must be concentrated on the construction of linguistic descriptions of learners’ languages which can illuminate their specific properties and their logic. (p. 16)

What Bley-Vroman advocates is, essentially, a learner-centred approach to understanding interlanguage, which considers the learner-created language system in its own right, on the basis of its own internal logic, rather than imposing target-language-based conceptions onto such a system.

L2 researchers have since been reminded of this necessary focus when conducting interlanguage research. But the question remains: what are the boundaries of the ‘comparative fallacy’? And what is the role of the native speaker in interlanguage analyses? In the L2 empirical research over the last 30 years, it has appeared to be a norm rather than an exception to employ native speakers: as
controls, as judges and, to a lesser degree, as subjects. Some studies compare the L2 data with the native speaker data to show differences, while others compare the two in order to understand why the L2 data look the way they do. In other words, some studies use native speaker data as an end in itself, whereas others use them as a means to an end. Would the former fall into the scope of the comparative fallacy?

The lack of a definition of the scope of comparative fallacy has, quite notably, led researchers to apply the term to a variety of different practices in SLA (see, e.g., Lakshmanan and Selinker, 2001; Lardiere, 2003), including the deployment of the native speaker as a model and a goal for adult L2 learning. A case in point is Cook (1999).

In his paper entitled ‘Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching’, Cook (1999: 185) claims that “the prominence of the native speaker in language teaching has obscured the distinctive nature of the successful L2 user and created an unattainable goal for L2 learners.” Driven by his conviction that a multilingual speaker is cognitively different from a monolingual speaker, Cook asserts that “late learnt languages can never be native languages,” and that “adults can never become native speakers without being reborn” (p. 187). He goes on to suggest that what an L2 user possesses cognitively is ‘multicompetence’, which, simply defined, is a combination of L1 and L2 competence and which is “intrinsically more complex than monolingualism” (p. 191). Seen in this light, relating the learner to the native speaker is falling into the comparative fallacy; “L2 users should be treated as people in their own right, not as deficient native speakers” (p. 195).¹

Cook argues that “language teaching should place more emphasis on the student as a potential and actual L2 user and be less concerned with the monolingual native speaker” (p. 196). He thereupon offers four suggestions to L2 teachers:

- setting goals appropriate to L2 users;
- including L2 user situations and roles;

¹Cook (1999) makes a distinction between L2 ‘users’ and ‘learners’, with the former referring to those who use an L2 and the latter to those who are in the process of learning it. Monolingual bias, he points out, ‘is also reflected in the prevalent use of the term L2 learner for anybody who knows an L2, whereas the term L2 learner is not applied to an adult native speaker’ (1999: 196).
using teaching methods that acknowledge the students’ L1; and
basing teaching on descriptions of L2 users (for a recent collection of descriptions, see Cook, 2002).

Taken together, these suggestions make it clear that the goal of L2 teaching should not be to create native speakers, but rather L2 users.

Cook highlights the importance of producing descriptions of successful L2 users, arguing that it is these descriptions that should form the basis of teaching. As Cook notes, “placing more emphasis on the successful L2 user and on using the L1 more in teaching can bring language teaching to the realization that it is helping people use L2s, not imitate native speakers” (p. 204). This emphasis on successful L2 users—rather than native speakers—as models for L2 learning brings to mind Davies’ definition of the native speaker, namely, to be a native speaker means not to be a nonnative speaker, so much so that one is tempted to allow for its antithesis to serve as a definition of the L2 user, that is, that to be an L2 user means not to be a native speaker.

Needless to say, to many, this definition of the L2 user would sound far too extreme. But more importantly, it is fraught with various issues. Four spring right to mind: First, how do we define successful L2 users? Secondly, assuming there is an agreed yardstick of successful L2 users, which of these users should serve as models of L2 learning, given the established vast number of individual differences? Here, we seem to be running into the same (if not more serious) difficulties as with the native speaker construct. There is perhaps an equal need here to differentiate between ‘myth’ (i.e., the ‘ideal’) and ‘reality’ (i.e., the ‘blood and flesh’). Thirdly, what were the models for the successful L2 users when they were learners, if not native speakers? Finally, in terms of development, is a successful L2 user in a static or dynamic state?

The diversity of opinions on the role of the native speaker in SLA notwithstanding, one can nevertheless seek a compromise, in my view. That is, one can let the (ideal) native speaker — as Davies suggests — function as a goal or an inspiration for L2 learning, but let the ideal L2 user serve as a measure of L2 learning, as Cook seems to advocate. Such a solution may potentially have a dual
advantage: it ensures that L2 learners have a high standard to which they can aspire in order to reach the maximum of their learning potential, and at the same time that they are recognized as unique in their own right, rather than as deficient native speakers, thereby avoiding the comparative fallacy.

IV Conclusions

The construct of the native speaker has been firmly entrenched in SLA research and L2 teaching. However, our understanding of it is not as profound nor as deep as it should be. Davies (1991; 2003) seeks to fill the gap by providing a systematic account of its major parameters. Partial as it may appear to be to L2 researchers for its primarily sociolinguistic orientation, Davies’ account provides a rich source of insights that SLA researchers can draw upon in formulating and conducting further research. Current SLA researchers are, in my view, confronted with two daunting tasks: the first is to systematically construct a developmental perspective on the native speaker or, more specifically, on what Davies has referred to as Grammar 2, and the second is to develop a parallel understanding of successful L2 users. Both lines of research are pivotal, not just to solving the native speaker conundrum, but more importantly, to establishing a scientific basis for SLA research practice as well as for L2 teaching, learning and testing.

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V References


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