Ingrid Piller, Hamburg
Who, if anyone, is a native speaker?[1]

1 Introduction

Recently, a debate on errors in letters of recommendation written by German university teachers of English was waged on the pages of this journal.[2] While I do not wish to enter the debate on the linguistic and didactic skills of German university teachers, I would like to reflect on the ways in which various linguistic concepts such as "native speaker," "error," "mother tongue" or "standard language" were used in the debate. In the following, I will first briefly summarize the assumptions about "native speakers" and "errors" that were put forward - explicitly or implicitly - by the contributors. I will then go on to discuss the current status of these concepts in Applied Linguistics, and I will finally offer a re-reading of the debate as an exercise in linguistic myth-making.

2 Of native and non-native speakers and their errors

Bonheim (1998, 119) contends that German university teachers of English commit errors because they have "failed to master" the English language. The bottom-line implication of this is that there exist such phenomena as a standard version of the English language against which errors can be measured, and that success in Second Language Learning (SLL) can be measured as a degree of "mastery". From my reading of the texts, I take it that "mastery" means error-free use of the standard language. It is unclear how such mastery can be achieved, however. As the linguistic skills of German university teachers who use English as a Second Language (ESL) are targeted, one might assume that the high road to error-free speech lies in the use of English as a First Language. This assumption, however, is debunked in Bonheim's (1999, 235) subsequent letter:

> [...] most native speakers have a shaky command of their own language; we
> have found this to be so particularly when a candidate for a teaching post has
> a certificate in teaching English as a Foreign Language!

This is doubly confusing: for one thing, it is obviously neither first nor second language acquisition that lead to mastery of English. Furthermore, readers are left wondering what it is exactly that studying for a certificate in EFL does to the language capacity. This confusion about the linguistic abilities of native and non-native speakers alike is even more apparent in a further reply: on the one hand, Imhof (1999, 246) chides the German letter writers and "perpetrators" of errors for their failure to have native speakers in their departments proof-read their papers. On the other hand, he goes on (Imhof 1999, 247) to castigate Earl Spencer's funeral

speech for Princess Di for the "grammatical wobblers, even downright howlers" it contained. Does that mean Earl Spencer holds a certificate in EFL, too? Does it mean my writing will sooner or later end up in Bonheim's error collection, whether through my own doing or the "help" of a native speaker of English? And what is the significance of all this?

It seems to me that the flaws of this argument hinge upon that fact that the meaning of some of the concepts invoked (particularly "native speaker" but also the contingent "mother tongue," "error," "standard language," "proficiency," "prescriptivism" etc.) is by no means as clear as it must have seemed to the writers. While the writers' use of the terms "native speaker" begs a number of questions, I do not wish to imply that the writers' use of the term "native speaker" is in any way idiosyncratic. It certainly accords with common sense, is time-honored and is frequently used in exactly the same way in work on SLL. Lightbown and Spada[3], for instance, identify a native speaker as "A person who has learned a language from an early age and who has full mastery of that language." Drawing on recent debates in Applied Linguistics, I will argue in the following that commonsensical as this definition may be, it does more to create a state to affairs than to explain one.

3   The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics[4]

Don't we all know who a native speaker is? Surely, she must be a speaker of the mother tongue, "the native speech that one learned at one's mother's knee"[5]? A definition like this one takes the circumstances of acquisition as the central criterion for defining a native speaker: persons who acquire a language in early childhood, say up to age five - the precise cutoff point is taken to be a different one by different writers but there seems to be a general notion that it is somewhere between day one and puberty - are native speakers of that language, and persons who learn the language beyond that age are non-native speakers. Furthermore, it is implied that age of acquisition and the concomitant distinction between native and non-native speaker matters because otherwise there would be no point in making the distinction. It is usually assumed that native speakers have privileged access to their mother tongue: they do not produce errors as non-native speakers do, and if they do, they can identify and correct them themselves while non-native speakers are incapable of this feat. Additionally, native speakers have privileged access to the language community: they belong while non-native speakers do not.

I will now go on to show that this definition and the assumptions that go with it beg a number of questions, and that they are not tenable in the end.

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[3] Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada, *How Languages are Learned*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 177.

[4] Such the title of Alan Davies, *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991).

[5] Leonard Bloomfield, "Literate and Illiterate Speech," *American Speech* 2/10 (1927): 432-439, 435.

3.1 Language or dialect?

Linguists are notoriously unable to define "a language" in linguistic terms. They typically fall back on Max Weinreich's famous definition "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy."[6] In a non-trivial sense languages do not exist as such but are abstractions and idealizations on the basis of a number of different dialects. There is no principled (linguistic) way to predict what this abstraction will be based on: German is a language that consists of mutually unintelligible varieties as is evidenced by the fact that the speech of speakers from Switzerland or Niederbayern is generally subtitled on national TV. Does a speaker whose speech is subtitled qualify as a native speaker? Croatian and Serbian, on the other hand, are mutually intelligible but have recently come to be considered distinct languages. Have former native speakers of Serbo-Croatian become native speakers of Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian respectively as a result of the tragic events in the former Yugoslavia? And what would such a transformation entail for their linguistic competence, specifically their capacity to produce error-free speech? These examples demonstrate that language status is a reification, and by implication native speaker status must necessarily be a reification, too.

3.2 Linguistic variation and the standard language

Every language - in the above sense as a reification - is characterized by variation: national variation, regional variation, ethnic variation, variation by class, gender, age etc. While it is generally accepted that there are many different varieties of English (or any other language), the question how variation relates to the definition of the native speaker has been less readily addressed. Is a native speaker only someone who learnt Received Pronunciation at her mother's knee? Or General American? What about those at whose mother's knee Indian English was spoken, or Gordie, or Ebonics? Only few people are exposed to the standard language in early childhood - an estimate for the British Isles speaks of about 3-4% of the population.[7]

Sociolinguistic literature highlights the fact that the idea of a standard language is - just like the idea of a language itself - a reification. Lippi-Green[8], for instance, lists the following features of Standard US English speakers as they emerge from various sociolinguistic surveys:

- with no regional accent;
- who reside in the midwest, far west or perhaps some part of the north-east (but never in the south);
- with more than average or superior education;
- who are themselves educators or broadcasters;

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[6] Quoted from Suzanne Romaine, *Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics.* (Oxford: OUP, 1994) 14.
[7] Tom McArthur. Ed. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language.* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 851.
[8] Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States.* (London: Routledge, 1997) 58.

- who pay attention to speech, and are not sloppy in terms of pronunciation or grammar;
- who are easily understood by all;
- who enter into a consensus of other individuals like themselves about what is proper language.

Obviously, the existence of a standard language is a myth which serves the interests of the few rather than the many. In trying to square the common-sense notion of the native speaker with this common sense notion of the standard language a most striking fact emerges: a native speaker of Standard English is logically impossible! A native speaker is supposedly born into the language while the standard is supposedly attained through superior education. And Southerners, people from New York City, and people who are neither educators nor broadcasters do not stand a chance anyway. How helpful is a concept that disqualifies the vast majority of US-Americans, if not all, as native speakers of English?

English as the most widely used language ever is furthermore characterized by a type of variation that is less characteristic of many other languages: variation between L1 and L2 usage. In countries where English enjoys some official status (from American Samoa to Zimbabwe), 337,407,300 L1 users of English find themselves in the company of 235,351,300 L2 users[9]. On a worldwide scale, L2 users outnumber L1 users by far: "[...] accepting even cautious estimates, there must be at least three nonnative users of English for every old-country native user."[10] From a sociolinguistic point of view there is no reason to regard variation between L1 and L2 users as in any way different from variation between speakers of various dialects or ethnolects. Most people would readily agree that difference does not automatically imply deficit. In Section 5 I will address the question why the different speech of L2 users is so readily judged as deficient in many discourses.

3.3 Multilingualism

The ideal native speaker is conceived as a monolingual. Chomsky's[11] famous dictum that he is only interested in "the ideal speaker-listener who lives in a homogeneous speech community" is a case in point. However, the fact of the matter is that the majority of the world's population is bi- or multilingual.[12] This is another proof to the fact that the concept of the "native speaker" is geared towards the exception rather than the norm - provided it has any explanatory value at all. What other consequences does the fact of widespread multilingualism have for the concept of the "native speaker"?

First, simultaneous childhood multilinguals, i.e. persons who are exposed to two or more languages at their mother's knee, must by definition be native speakers of

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[9] David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 57-60.

[10] Braj B. Kachru and Cecil L. Nelson, "World Englishes," In: Sandra Lee McKay and Nancy H. Hornberger. Eds. *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*. (Cambride: Cambridge UP, 1996): 71-102, 79.

[11] Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. (Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 1965) 13.

[12] e.g. John Edwards, *Multilingualism*. (London: Penguin, 1994) 33.

more than one language. However, most researchers in multilingualism agree that the monolingual and the multilingual competence differ in principle[13]. While monolinguals use their language to fulfil all their linguistic needs, multilinguals usually employ each language for different functions and in different domains. An English-German bilingual child, for instance, might use English with her parents, German with her peers, or English to play with her pet and German to scold the pet. Formal text types are usually only available or more fully developed in the language in which schooling takes place. If the linguistic abilities of a monolingual native speaker differ from those of a multilingual native speaker, the concept further loses any diagnostic value it might possess.

Second, in multilingual societies or under conditions of migration it is not uncommon that the development of the first language comes to a halt at an early age. This is particularly so when the language of early childhood and the language of schooling do not coincide and children are subjected to a process of "subtractive bilingualism"[14] in which acquiring an L2 means losing the L1. Kouritzin[15], for instance, describes cases in which first language loss is so complete that neither an active nor a passive command of the L1 remain. Complete First Language Loss in adult L2 users is unlikely and uncommon but transfer from the L2 into the L1 are frequently attested. Waas,[16] for instance, describes how L1 German is affected by contact with L2 English: speakers have lexical access problems in their L1, lexical borrowing from the L2 into the L1 is frequent, article and preposition use change ("*für* ein Jahr lang"), all morphological categories (case, plural, tense etc.) show signs of transfer, as does word order and syntax (e.g. subject-verb inversion, verb in subordinate clauses after the subject). In the lexical domain, speakers often have a different vocabulary in different languages because they have different experiences in different languages. A student of mine at Hamburg University comments as follows on the influence of her High School year in the US on her L1 German:

> Of course it took only a few weeks to get adjusted to using German again, although some problems remained in terms of using vocabulary I had first been confronted with in America. Vocabulary concerning war (I had been in America during the "Operation Desert Storm") or car utensils (I passed my driving test in America) are examples for this. In these cases the English words came to my mind before I could think of the German equivalent. (Inga Robinson)[17]

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[13] e.g. Francois Grosjean, "A Psycholinguistic Approach to Code-Switching: The Recognition of Guest Words by Bilinguals," In: Lesley Milroy and Pieter Muysken. Eds. *One Speaker, Two Languages: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on Code-Switching.* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 259-275.

[14] e.g. Colin Baker, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism.* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1996) 66.

[15] Sandra G. Kouritzin, *Face[t]s of First Language Loss.* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999).

[16] Margit Waas, *Language Attrition Downunder: German Speakers in Australia.* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1996) 162ff.

[17] All quotations from student essays were obtained with the permission of the students and their agreement that their real names should be used.

Even pronunciation and accent which are commonly thought to be fairly immune to change after puberty have been shown to be affected by extended language contact. In a study of the voice onset time of five L1 English speakers who had lived in Brazil for an extended period, Major[18] showed that three of these had adopted the shorter voice onset time of Portuguese into their English. Given that the competence of native speakers is subject to change and even loss under conditions of language contact, it does no longer make sense to accord native speakers a special place as the arbiters of correct usage. If I do not ask native speakers in my department to proof-read my papers, this is not "due to an attack of hubris" (Imhof 1999, 246) but rather to the consideration that their English is as likely to show transfer from German as mine.

3.4 Performance and perception

Some authors argue that native speaker status does not result from any particular linguistic competence but from acceptance into the native speaker community. Coppieters[19], for instance, comes to the following conclusion in his study of the differences between native and near-native speakers of French: "a speaker of French is someone who is accepted as such by the community referred to as that of French speakers, not someone who is endowed with a specific underlying linguistic system." So, native speaker status is about social identity and not about linguistic competence. In contemporary social theory,[20] social identity is conceived of not as a set of (stable) traits but as social construction in interaction. Social interaction works two ways: we construct our own identity but at the same time we are being co-constructed by others. In other words, identity is (self)-performed and (other)-perceived. The performance and perception of native speaker status is strongly tied in with another aspect of social identity, namely nationality. As Anderson[21] convincingly argues, identity construction through national belonging and mother tongue affiliation developed both at the same time and are dependent upon each other. Consequently, Kramsch[22] redefines the native speaker as

> an imaginary construct - a canonically literate monolingual middle-class member of a largely fictional national community whose citizens share a belief in a common history and a common destiny.

The problem is that this imaginary construct is not a frequent human specimen: contemporary urban societies are largely multiethnic. Another problem with this native speaker is that the perception of belonging is based upon other criteria than

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[18] Roy C. Major, "L2 Acquisition, L1 Loss, and the Critical Period Hypothesis," In: Allan James and Jonathan Leather. Eds. *Second-Language Speech: Structure and Process*. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997): 147-159.

[19] René Coppieters, "Competence Differences between Native and Near-Native Speakers," *Language* 63 (1987): 544-573, 565.

[20] e.g. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "the Politics of Recognition."* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992)

[21] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. (London: Verso, 1991) 67-82.

[22] Claire Kramsch, "The Privilege of the Nonnative Speaker," *PMLA* 112/3 (1997): 359-369, 363.

linguistic ones: in my own work,[23] for instance, I have shown that women with partners from another linguistic background are oftentimes no longer perceived as legitimate native speakers of their L1. The perception is not based upon linguistic considerations but upon notions of gender and national identity. These notions date back to the Code Napoleon, the first modern statute to decree that a wife's nationality should follow that of her husband - a regulation that was soon adopted by other European countries, too. That is "a woman's political relation to the nation was submerged as a social relation to a man through marriage. For women, citizenship in the nation was mediated by the marriage relationship within the family."[24] And native speaker status is mediated through nationality.

It is not only considerations of nationality and gender that override linguistic criteria in the perception of native speaker status but also race. Lippi-Green (1997, 226) relates an instructive story which I will quote in full:

> A young woman of Asian Indian family, but a native and monolingual speaker of English, relates a story in which a middle-aged man in a music store is unable to help her when she asks for a recently released Depeche Mode tape [...]. "You'll have to speak slower because I didn't understand you because of your accent," he tells her. She is understandably hurt and outraged: "I have no discernible accent. I do, however, have long dark hair and pleasantly colored brown skin. I suppose this outward appearance of mine constitutes enough evidence to conclude I had, indeed, just jumped off the boat and into the store."

The most drastic example of the co-constructed nature of native speaker status comes from Nazi Germany, where Germans of Jewish faith or heritage were denied to be mother tongues speakers of German. Instead, Hebrew was declared their mother tongue.[25] Those few Jews who survived in Germany[26] were banned from receiving German newspapers (Stolzfus 1996, 174) or reading German books.[27] These examples will suffice to demonstrate that the performance and, more crucially, the perception of native speaker status are not necessarily based on linguistic evidence but are always mediated by other facets of social identity such as nationality, gender, race, religion, heritage, or class.

In this view, the idea of the mother tongue loses its significance as a reality but continues to be of interest as a linguistic ideology. Particularly the term "mother tongue" has deeply ideological overtones as it comes with an insistence on

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[23] Ingrid Piller, "'Something tattooed on my forehead:' gendered performances and perceptions of linguistic and national identity," In: Ursula Pasero and Friederike Braun. Eds. *Wahrnehmung und Herstellung von Geschlecht - Perceiving and Performing Gender*. (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999) 117-126.

[24] Anne McClintock, "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family," *Feminist Review* 44 (1993): 61-80, 65.

[25] e.g. Appeal by the German Studentry "Against the Ungerman Spirit" (April 1933); cf. Florian Coulmas, "A matter of choice," In: Martin Pütz. Ed. *Language Choices: Conditions, Constraints and Consequences*. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997): 31-44, 34.

[26] Ca. 13,000 out of ca. 500,000. See Nathan Stolzfus, *Resistance of the Heart. Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany*. (New York: W W Norton, 1996) xxvi; 304.

[27] Victor Klemperer, *LTI*. (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993) 18.

authenticity and moral significance "as the one first and therefore *real* language of a speaker, transparent to the true self."[28]

3.5 Summary

In 1981, Coulmas[29] could still write: "The concept of native speaker occupies a central position in the study of language, [...]." A couple of years later the native speaker was proclaimed dead.[30] In 1985, the death verdict resulting from Paikeday's inquiry was so controversial that no publisher would touch it, he had to publish it himself, "and linguists and educators circulated it under the table." (Kramsch 1997, 362) Since then the notion of the native speaker has been widely problematized in Applied Linguistics.[31] Coulmas (1997) himself has in fact discarded the native speaker as an explanatory construct in a recent article, in which he describes mother tongue claiming and native speaker status solely as acts of individual choice:

> The individual person whose role in the acquisition of linguistic knowledge is in fact acknowledged is the mysterious *native speaker* or "mother tongue" speaker, who allegedly has privileged knowledge of his mother tongue. But this term rests on two assumptions that seem dubious on closer inspection, namely that there is a categorical difference between mother tongue and other forms of language and that one's mother tongue is destiny and not decision. (Coulmas 1997, 43)

Indeed, speakers do choose other languages than their L1 as their native language(s). Paul Celan chose German as the language of his poetry instead of his L1 Romanian, Joseph Conrad chose English as the language of his novels instead of his L1 Polish, Salman Rushdie writes in English instead of his L1 Gujarati, and Jorge Semprún in French instead of his L1 Spanish "because he had turned French into his mother tongue" (Coulmas 1997, 32). Furthermore, these choices need not be mutually exclusive as the following example from a student essay demonstrates: "English to me has become more and more a second native tongue." (Antje Scherffig)

In this section I have outlined why Applied Linguists have come to relinquish the notion of the native speaker as a person of flesh and blood: because language status is a reification; because language is characterized by variation, and the standard language is just another reification; because the human language faculty is multilingual; and because the performance and perception of native speaker status is not (solely) linguistic but mediated by other social relations. If not in flesh and blood, would it be useful to hang on to the notion of the native speaker as an abstraction? I will discuss this question in the next section but leave you to judge for yourself how useful a research abstraction is that abstracts from quantitatively

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[28] Kathryn A. Woolard, "Introduction: Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry," In: Bambi B. Schiefflin, Kathryn A. Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity. Eds. *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998): 3-47, 18.

[29] Florian Coulmas, "Introduction: The Concept of Native Speaker," In: Florian Coulmas. Ed. *A Festschrift for Native Speaker*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1981): 1-25, 22.

[30] Thomas M. Paikeday, *The Native Speaker Is Dead!* (Toronto, Paikeday).

[31] See Kramsch 1997, 368, fn. 4 for a reading list.

peripheral members of a group (monolingual standard speakers) rather than from central ones.

4   Native speakers and errors

Even if the native speaker does not exist in flesh and blood but is an idealization, it might still be an useful one. Does the native speaker's early acquisition lead to privileged access to the language? Is the linguistic competence of native speakers somehow fundamentally different from that of non-native speakers (who have acquired the language at a later point in their lives)? Is the speech of native speakers for instance less error-prone than that of non-native speakers? Does that capacity make them the sole arbiters of correct usage, and what are the implications for language teaching? In the following I will focus on errors, their relationship to native speaker status, and consequences for language teaching.

4.1   Errors as norm violations

As regards errors it is useful to draw a distinction between errors that result from conflicting norms, and errors that result from incomplete acquisition of the system. The former are errors of the type Earl Spencer is quoted with (Imhof 1999, 247): "the anguish *of* AIDS" or "immersed *by* duty." Such "errors" (I will call them "errors 1" for lack of a better term) are not in any way contingent upon age of acquisition. Rather, they result from conflicting norms - in the sense of Coseriu [32] as a level of linguistic knowledge that mediates between competence and performance. Errors 1 are often a sign of language change in progress, i.e. some speakers apply the rule "*anguish* takes *at*" while others apply the rule "*anguish* takes *of*." Of course it is risky to try and predict language change but my guess is that "*anguish* takes *of*" is not in a bad position, for British English at least, as it is obviously being applied by a member of the British aristocracy and has found its way into a secondary school textbook. It bears pointing out that my guess about the future of the rules "*anguish* takes *at/of*" is not based on any perception of intrinsic value. In fact, I cannot conceive of a lucid reason why one should be intrinsically preferable to the other (supposing one discards "*anguish* has taken *at* for a couple of centuries now[33], so why should this change?" as a lucid reason). Rather, my guess is based on the information I have about the users of the rule "*anguish* takes *of*" - an aristocrat and educators. Rules violated by errors 1 are social rules rather than linguistic ones. They are set up as markers of status (mainly educational, class and professional status) and are subject to change under conditions of social change[34] - that is why they are so passionately fought over in editorials, at parties, and why certain people are motivated to contribute significant efforts and resources to

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[32] Eugenio Coseriu, *Textlinguistik: eine Einführung*. (Tübingen: Francke, 1994), 7-67.

[33] Just for the record: the OED (on CD-ROM, 2nd. ed.) does not list a single incidence of "anguish at" but has "anguish of" attested a number of times: "I haue suffred many anguysshes of hungre." (Caxton, 1485), "The anguish of corns and toothache." (Cyples, 1880), or "The deep anguish of despair." (Scott, 1810).

[34] For a detailed version of this argument see, e.g., Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*. (London: Routledge, 1995).

obscure causes such as "die Wahrung der deutschen Sprache"[35] or "den Krieg gegen 'Tschüss.'"[36]

It may seem that the discussion of errors 1 is irrelevant to an understanding of the competence of native and non-native speakers - as the concomitant rules do not operate on the level of competence but on the level of norms. Nevertheless, errors 1 are instructive for the native speaker debate as they clearly show that error diagnosis works as a process of social identity construction, or social exclusion if you will. These norms are predicated upon the usage and preferences of certain societal groups, say white educated male middle-class professionals. Those who do not abide by these linguistic norms because they operate on a different set of norms are perceived as a) not to belong to the group of central members of a society, and b) not to behave appropriately. And - thus goes the common fallacy - because they do not abide by the linguistic norms (in the making of which they had no say whatsoever) they are not competent in other spheres of life either. Someone who says "the anguish of AIDS" suddenly turns out to have no character, values and morals, and surely "if she cannot express herself PROPERLY, her ideas cannot be worth listening to." While I do not know whether this specific judgement (using "anguish of" is a sign of debased character) has ever been made, failure to observe this or that norm has been held responsible for almost any social evil from teenage pregnancies to general decline by well-published speakers and writers including Prince Charles or John Major.[37]

Most linguists find errors 1 thoroughly boring and cannot be bothered to be drawn into prescriptivist debates about the comparative merits of "anguish at/of." This perceived lack of theoretical relevance is incidentally one of the reasons why German linguists failed to address themselves to debates over the reform of German orthography which had the rest of the population enthralled in passionate argument. However, I am arguing here that failure to understand the social relevance of discourses about errors against the norm will eventually obscure what it means to list errors that violate the grammatical system. Basically, discourses about errors 1 and errors 2, to which I will now turn, fulfil the same social function.

4.2 Errors as competence violations

Errors 2 result from an incomplete acquisition of the linguistic system of a language. In effect, such errors can only be made by second language speakers (or first language speakers who suffer from a language impairment, or from first language loss or attrition). Thus, while some native speakers may say "anguish at" and others "anguish of," it can be assumed that no native speaker would produce "B.C. *has taken* my 'Introduction to the Study of English' a year ago." (Bonheim 1998, 120) The writer of this sentence presumably failed to internalize a basic tense

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[35] Preservation of the German language. See http://www.vwds.de
[36] War against 'Tschuess.' One of the avowed aims of the "Förderverein bairische Sprache und Dialekte." See Hermann Unterstöger, "'Pfui Deifi' für Meisterkoch Alfons Schuhbeck: Ein Verein bemüht sich um die bairische Sprache," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 232 (07 October 1999): 48.
[37] For an assorted collection of such pronouncements see Cameron 1995, 78-115.

rule of English, one which early learners acquire "naturally." I am not trying to argue that this example should not be considered an error. It obviously is a violation of a principle of English grammar, and the general fact that second language learners produce grammatical errors is obvious enough. The central question here is whether someone who produces such a sentence is of necessity a non-native speaker of English while a native speaker would never produce such a sentence. Davies (1991, 13-14; 38-49), discusses the same question by referring to a transcript of L1 speech, which contains a number of violations of grammatical structures of English ("I didn't yawn out." "I'm not tired didn't.") Thus, native speakers do violate basic grammatical rules in contexts which Davies (1991, 13; 46) identifies as poetic or as "foreigner talk." Davies (1991, 14) deducts from this that errors cannot be defined independently of context:

> An ill-informed language view assumes that certain forms are correct,
> always so, and certain forms incorrect, again always so. This cannot be so;
> correctness if it exists depends on context, [...]

For the discussion of the interrelationship between (non-)native speakers and errors this means that certain features of native speaker speech "might well be corrected and/or stigmatised if the speakers were known/thought to be non native speakers" (Davies 1991, 13). Perceived/known native speakers, on the other hand, will enjoy the benefit of the doubt: poetic license? simplification for a foreigner? negligence? lack of concentration? etc. In the end, we are caught in a circular argument: we know a native speaker from a non-native speaker by the violations against the grammatical system that the latter produce in contrast to the former. However, when confronted with a particular linguistic feature that might qualify as error we take this to be a sign of incomplete competence acquisition if we know the producer to be a non-native speaker. If we know her to be a native speaker, on the other hand, we regard the feature as a slip in performance. A sentence such as "Miss Cummins was *participant* in one of my language courses last semester." (Bonheim 1998, 121), for instance, is regarded as a sign that the writer has not fully acquired the English article system because s/he is known/thought to be a non-native speaker of English. I bet that the sentence would have been judged to contain a typo if the writer had been known/thought to be a native speaker. So, error analysis does not work as a criterion to distinguish native and non-native speakers, either.

4.3 Anything goes? Reconceptualizing linguistic expertise

I have been arguing that a list of errors such as the one presented by Bonheim (1998) does not have any indicative value as regards linguistic competence, be it native, near-native, or non-native. Does that explain away the faults of those pieces of writing? Even considering the fact that they are decontextualized sentences, which makes it difficult to judge, I do not think it does. A fair number of them are not competence but norm violations, and many are stylistic oddities. At the end of the day, they are just pieces of poor writing. As such they may result from a variety of causes: incomplete acquisition of English, lapses in performance, unfamiliarity with the text type, failure to draft and proof-read, time-constraints, or maybe some

of the writers are just electronically challenged and have not yet figured out how to use a spell and grammar checker.

Clearly, no one who writes a sentence such as "I found her a very interested student who likes to become familiar with many aspects of English Studies." (Bonheim 1998, 121) is doing anyone a favor – not because of grammatical errors but because of the content and the pragmatic implications of such a statement. Therefore, improvements are desirable. Linguists are often criticized for their lax attitudes towards questions of good and bad language. They themselves call this approach "descriptivism" and assume it is a virtue. I wonder whether Bonheim (1998, 119) wished to implicitly criticize exactly such a perceived "anything goes" attitude when he wrote: "A curious phenomenon was that many mistakes were committed by academics who identified themselves expressly as university teachers of linguistics." However that may be, I feel that the general perception that language specialists do not care about language is unfortunate (cf. also Cameron 1995, 212-236). Having just engaged in deconstructing the common-sense notions of "native speaker" and "error" I therefore consider myself under a certain obligation to come up with some practical suggestions how the bad writing in question could be improved.

First, good writing is a product of application, which means spending time on drafting and re-drafting, writing and re-writing, and a couple of rounds of proof-reading. I suspect that few of the quoted letter writers applied this advice that we offer so readily to our students.

Second, a standardized text type such as a letter of recommendation does not call for a new creative effort each time such a letter is written. As standardized text types, letters of recommendation follow a certain pattern and employ certain set phrases. All that is needed to remedy all the "gaucherie" identified by Bonheim (1998, 120) is probably nothing more than the careful study of some sample letters.

Third, language expertise needs to be a specified body of knowledge, and there has to be an accepted certification procedure. This third point brings me back to my concern with native speaker status. In suggesting a certification procedure for linguistic expertise I am drawing on ideas put forward by Rampton.[38] Like myself, Rampton is also concerned with the myths that surround the concept of the native speaker. Noting the discrimination this confusion breeds in educational contexts he suggests to "shift the emphasis from 'who you are' to 'what you know', and this has to be a more just basis for the recruitment of teachers." (Rampton 1990, 99) Therefore, it must be our long-term goal to transcend the fruitless debate on who can teach English and who can write rec letters in English, and to supplant the idea of the native speaker with that of the language expert. This does not mean substituting an old term with a new one:

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[38] M.B.H. Rampton, "Displacing the 'native speaker': expertise, affiliation, and inheritance," *ELT Journal* 44/2 (1990): 97-101.

> [...] if native speaker competence is used to set targets and define
> proficiency, the learner is left playing a game in which the goal-posts are
> being perpetually moved by people they cannot often challenge. But if you
> talk about expertise, then you commit yourself to specifying much more
> closely the body of knowledge that students have to aim at. Learning and
> teaching become much more accountable. (Rampton 1990, 99)

An agreed-upon certification process for English language experts in terms of proficiency targets seems the surest remedy to alleviate any competence problems German university teachers of English might have. As is currently the case the final exams of some universities and Bundesländer contain up to seven language components (in addition to the linguistics, literature, and possibly didactics, sections) while the final exams in other places do not even contain a single language component - small wonder that there are stark differences in linguistic competence.

Furthermore, it is a fallacy to assume that native speakers make better language teachers qua status. Testimonies of successful second language learners generally bear witness to the fact that teachers who are second language speakers themselves make for more realistic and inspiring role-models.[39]

5   Beyond linguisism

I hope to have shown two points in the preceding sections. First, that the concept "native speaker" is an idealization of little, if any, explanatory value. Second, that errors or bad writing should be addressed with *what-* and *how*-questions instead of *who*-questions. "What constitutes an error or bad writing and how can it be improved?" instead of "Who produced it?" If native speaker status is a useless construct in linguistics, and if native speakers and errors can only be linked in a circular argument, why do these concepts continue to be invoked? Why are error analyses, ESL textbooks, ESL teacher manuals, or job ads full of it?

Pennycook[40] shows how the English Language Teaching profession grew and expanded with colonialism. Specifically, he traces the construction of native and non-native speakers to the colonial construction of Self and Other. The native speaker of any language (this argument does not only work for English) is part of the imaginary Self, the non-native speaker forever excluded as the Other. Postcolonial studies have also alerted us to the fact that the Other is not only construed as different from the Self but also as deficient. Some of these belief systems have been challenged and changed over this century: someone who construes sexual difference as deficit is a sexist, and someone who associates differences in skin color with deficiencies is a racist. People who construe linguistic

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[39] e.g. Kouritzin (1999, 192); or Natasha Lvovich, *The Multilingual Self.* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997); or George Braine. Ed. *Non-Native Educators in English Language Teaching.* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999).
[40] Alastair Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism.* (London: Routledge, 1998).

differences as deficiencies have not yet been widely identified as linguisists, though. As Fairman[41] writes:

> Sexism, racism and "Standard empowerment" are three forms of prejudice. [...] Teachers are trained not to teach the first two prejudices but they are the last one.

Linguistically, the native speaker concept is useless and should therefore be discarded. Socially, the "birthright mentality"[42] that goes with it is debilitating and unfair, and should therefore be discarded, too. As discourse analysts, however, we should carefully examine discourses about native speakers and the mother tongue as instances of the discursive construction of difference, deficit, and dominance.

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[41] Tony Fairman, "Schooled and open Englishes," *English Today* 15/1 (1999): 24-30, 29.

[42] Mae Wlazlinski, "Review of Braine, George. Ed. 1999. *Non-Native Educators in English Language Teaching*. New Jersey: LEA," *The Linguist List* 10.999 at http://www.linguistlist.org/issues/10/10-999.html