Passing for a native speaker: Identity and success in second language learning

Ingrid Piller

University of Sydney, Australia

In sociolinguistic interviews for a research project on cross-cultural marriage, 27 out of 73 second language (L2) users of English and German were found to claim that they had achieved high-level proficiency in their L2 and that they were passing for native speakers in some contexts. Based on these insiders' accounts, the article provides a description of passing for a native speaker as a (frequently overlooked) form of L2 ability. The introduction discusses ethnographic research into success in second language learning (SLL) and explains why other approaches tend to identify a significantly lower incidence of high-level achievement. Quantitative analysis of the data suggests that the age of first exposure to the target language is far less crucial to success than has so far been assumed. The L2 users themselves distinguish between age of first exposure and age when they 'really' started to learn their L2, thereby pointing to the role of motivation and agency in successful SLL. Qualitative analysis of the L2 users' accounts indicates that, for them, passing practices are quite different from widely held assumptions about passing. Passing is described as a temporary, context-, audience- and medium-specific performance. The article ends with a discussion of the evaluation of passing and its role in (perceived) success in SLL.

KEYWORDS: Passing, second language learning, ultimate attainment, critical period hypothesis, native speaker, identity, ideology

1. INTRODUCTION

Although research into second language learning (SLL) has traditionally tended to concentrate 'on beginning or intermediate learners rather than on advanced learners' (Spolsky 2000: 159), interest in advanced learners has grown in recent years (Birdsong 1992; Bongaerts 1999; Bongaerts, Mennen and van der Slik 2000; Bongaerts, Planken and Schils 1995; Bongaerts, Van Summeren, Planken and Schils 1997; Coppieters 1987; Cranshaw 1998; Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi and Moselle 1994; Moyer 1999; White and Genesee 1996). The disregard for advanced second language (L2) learners in many quarters of applied linguistics is due to a widespread assumption held in the field, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which goes back to Lenneberg (1967) and

posits maturational constraints on language acquisition. While the existence of a critical period for first language acquisition is uncontroversial, its existence and form are much more controversial in SLL as is, for instance, evidenced by the Flege (1987)–Patkowski (1990) controversy more than a decade ago, and it has recently come under renewed scrutiny (Birdsong 1999; Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow 2000). However, for the time being, the CPH enjoys wide currency in the field, with recent textbooks usually drawing on Long's (1990) widely quoted and influential overview article. As Bialystok (1997: 116) points out, the CPH has, often in weaker forms such as 'the earlier SLL starts, the better', 'lingered in discussions of both theory and practice, occasionally becoming explicit but usually lurking as a set of tacit assumptions'.

However, the research into advanced L2 learners cited above identified late learners whose performance has become indistinguishable from that of native speakers on a range of phonological and morphosyntactic measures. In this article, I am attempting to add to this body of research through an ethnographic account of the ways in which advanced L2 learners themselves view their performances. My motivation for this attempt lies in an effort to reconceptualize advanced L2 learners as expert L2 users, and to transcend the pervasive non-native–native speaker dichotomy. Although I am sympathetic to the argument that one learns as long as one lives, we stop speaking of first language (L1) learners after a certain age has been reached (even if the odd new word is acquired every now and then). Therefore, it seems inappropriate to treat L2 users as perpetual learners. Surely, at one point one stops being a learner and becomes a user. I am arguing that adult L2 users, i.e. people who learnt their L2 after the onset of puberty, can, and often do, achieve high-level proficiency. However, they and their achievements are often overlooked by SLL researchers and educators.

The achievements of advanced L2 users are usually measured against those of L1 speakers of the same language. However, recent advances in the field have made it clear that we cannot turn to native competence and performance as a measure of L2 proficiency because the expert L2 user is a multilingual while the typical native speaker is conceptualised as a monolingual. Cook (1992) makes a strong argument for the fact that successful L2 speakers are multicompetent language users and that their competence differs from that of monolinguals in principle: that is, it is not only their knowledge of the L2 that differs from that of monolingual native speakers of the L2, but their knowledge of their L1 also differs from that of monolinguals. His suggestion that the SLL research paradigm be integrated with the one of multilingualism has since been followed up by a number of researchers (e.g. Kecskes and Papp 2000; Pavlenko 1999). The primacy of the native speaker as the provider of baseline data against which to measure ultimate attainment, has been questioned both in research (e.g. Kramsch 1997; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; Piller 2001a) and by the Second Language Teaching (SLT) profession (e.g. Braine 1999; Cook 1999; Liu 1999), and is no longer tenable. At the same time, we do not know how else to measure

high-level attainment in SLL. This article aims to provide a description of high-level achievement through the accounts of expert L2 users themselves. In these accounts passing for a native speaker emerged as a focal point for the 'measurement' of high achievement by the successful L2 users themselves.

In recent years, passing has attracted significant interest in gender studies (e.g. Barret 1999; Butler 1990; Hall 1995; Holland 1999) and ethnic studies (e.g. Browder 1999; Bucholtz 1995), where it has come to be seen as crucial to the understanding of the production of identity as a social category. The insiders' accounts of expert L2 users and their linguistic passing practices described in this article are potentially as destabilizing to linguistic social identities (non-native vs. native speakers) as accounts of gender and ethnic passing are to ideologies of stable, essential, authentic and dichotomous assumptions of gender (women vs. men) and racial (black vs. white) identities. The stability of linguistic identities has been questioned in the emerging field of crossing studies (Rampton 1995, 1999a, 2001). Ben Rampton (2001: 50), the key proponent of the field, states that 'crossing's defining interest [is] in the use of a language that doesn't obviously belong to the speaker'. Thus, a recent thematic issue of this journal entitled *Styling the Other* (*Journal of Sociolinguistics* 1999, 3/4) included, inter alia, explorations of White American boys appropriating African American Vernacular English (Bucholtz 1999; Cutler 1999), a Chinese American man trying to align himself with his Korean American friends by using code-switches into Korean (Lo 1999), and London school children switching into words of their instructed foreign language German every now and then (Rampton 1999b). Like the expert L2 users to be discussed here, these speakers use language varieties that obviously do not belong to them through heritage. However, these language varieties do not belong to them through expertise, either. The speakers in these studies appropriate an invented language variety – Cutler's (1999) informant, for instance, uses the phonology of African American Vernacular English, but not the grammar, and the German repertoire of Rampton's (1999b) informants does not exceed a very limited number of set phrases. By contrast, the highly proficient L2 speakers in this study are, on occasion, warranted as native speakers by 'authentic'[1] native speakers. That is, speakers to whom the language belongs through heritage and expertise ('authentic' native speakers) are under the impression that the same is true for the L2 speaker.

While it is clear that it is neither scientifically nor ethically sound to measure ultimate attainment against native speaker baseline data, the prevailing disregard of expert L2 users has led to a situation where we do not have any idea of what other yardstick to use. Therefore, for the purposes of this article I will take self-identification as measure, i.e. I discuss the accounts of those who say of themselves that they are very advanced L2 users and who cite the fact that they can pass for native speakers on occasion as evidence for that claim. It is the aim of this article to describe passing practices as fully as possible and to attempt an explanation of the fact that my research indicates that high-level

attainment by late L2 learners and passing is much more frequent than linguistic research, and particularly work in ultimate attainment, tends to suggest. Before I will do so, I will discuss some methodological issues in ultimate attainment research in order to justify my ethnographic approach to passing – an approach which has rarely been used in this field.

2. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Most research into ultimate attainment concentrates exclusively on two aspects of the L2 linguistic system: phonology and syntax. Other parts of the linguistic system such as lexis and the conceptual system, and discourse and pragmatics are, by and large, ignored in ultimate attainment research. One consequence of this phono-syntactic bias is a preference for experimental methods. Typically, two groups of research subjects are chosen, 'near-native' users who are the subject of the research and native-speakers who provide the baseline data. These two groups are then engaged in tasks such as interviews (e.g. Patkowski 1980), reading texts out loud (e.g. Bongaerts 1999; Bongaerts et al. 1995; Bongaerts et al. 1997; Bongaerts et al. 2000), the production of contrastively difficult sounds (e.g. Moyer 1999), grammaticality judgements (e.g. Birdsong 1992; Cranshaw 1998; DeKeyser 2000), cloze tests (e.g. Cranshaw 1998), or production tasks that are designed to tap into a particular aspect of the subjects' grammar such as the subjacency and empty category principles (e.g. White and Genesee 1996). The contradictory results of this research paradigm are well known: while some of these studies find post-puberty learners who have become indistinguishable from native speakers, the majority do not. The blurb of a recent edited collection on the CPH even goes so far as to herald these contradictory results as one of the strengths of the volume:

> The chapters approach the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) from diverse perspectives and are evenly balanced in favor of and against the CPH-L2A. Each of the contributors brings authority and an international reputation to the question. (Birdsong 1999)

A comprehensive critical overview of these conflicting results has recently been provided by Marinova-Todd et al. (2000): their careful meta-analysis of 35 studies of the CPH in relation to ultimate attainment reveals that:

> Researchers [. . .] have often committed the same blunders as members of the general public: misinterpretation of the facts, misattribution of age differences in language abilities to neurobiological factors, and, most notably, a misemphasis on poor adult learners and an underemphasis on adults who master L2s to native-like levels. (Marinova-Todd et al. 2000: 9)

In addition to the problems in interpretation Marinova-Todd et al. (2000) identify in the ultimate attainment research paradigm, I would like to add that the invisibility of highly proficient L2 users is also a result of methodological choices. It is impossible to overlook the fact that the rich arsenal of linguistic

research methods has not been fully exploited in ultimate attainment research. In particular, the methods employed in the research paradigm as a whole – and this does not detract from the merits of individual research projects in this tradition – have been characterised by a number of biases: namely, monolingual bias, phono-syntactic bias, production bias, third-person bias, and lack of ecological validity.

Monolingual bias.   The use of native speakers to provide baseline data is a result of the monolingual bias of mainstream linguistics. As pointed out in the introduction, an L2 user is a multicompetent (Cook 1992) bi- or multilingual and cannot be expected to end up with a competence that is identical or even similar to that of a monolingual native speaker. As Cook (1999: 187) pithily puts it: 'Asserting that ''adults usually fail to become native speakers'' [. . .] is like saying that ducks fail to become swans'. Thus, there is a collective failure to study successful L2 speakers and their competence and performance in its own right, without recourse to baseline native speaker data.

Phono-syntactic bias.   Linguistics has, over the last three decades, been characterised by a turn to discourse. In the course of this development the sentence has lost its privileged status, and discourse, including cognitive, pragmatic, and social aspects of human communication, have become the data. However, this development has virtually not found its way into ultimate attainment research at all. At the same time, an increasing number of scholars are concerned with the fact that SLL implies the acquisition of not only lexico-grammatical knowledge but also discursive practices by which L2 users make identity choices and position themselves in relation to other discourse participants (e.g. McKay and Wong 1996; Norton 2000; and particularly the contributions to Pavlenko and Blackledge 2001; and to Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller and Teutsch-Dwyer 2001).

Production bias.   One of the most exciting recent developments in phonetic research has been a move away from the focus on production to a focus on perception. Strand (1999), for instance, demonstrates how gender perceptions influence speech processing by drawing on the McGurk effect, which 'is a robust perceptual effect in which visual information about spoken segments is fused with auditory information to affect perception of the entire audiovisual signal' (Strand 1999: 129–130). However, very few researchers in ultimate attainment acknowledge the fact that their research subject is not only a matter of production (how L2 users speak) but also one of perception (how L2 users are positioned and how their linguistic practices are perceived by their communities). One of the few authors to do so is Coppieters (1987: 565), who argues that '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'. An instructive story of the ways in which

visual perception may override speech production in the evaluation of the nativeness of speech is told by Lippi-Green:

> 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'. (Lippi-Green 1997: 226)

Third-person bias.   In the ethnography of communication it is a central concern to give insider accounts of what is going on in a particular society or group and to avoid the imposition of outside categories. However, ultimate attainment research does exactly that and no one has, to the best of my knowledge, ever thought of asking L2 users whether they consider themselves high-level achievers, what high-level proficiency means to them, and how and why it has been achieved, or whether they can and do pass for native speakers. While ethnographic research has greatly extended our knowledge of bilingual education (e.g. Heller 1999; Hornberger 1988), literacy (e.g. Blackledge 2000; Egbo 2000), first language loss (e.g. Kouritzin 1999), or the study abroad experience (e.g. Polanyi 1995), such accounts have yet to be written for expert L2 users, and particularly passers. In an insightful discussion of the bias against first-person narratives in SLL research, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) explain the causes behind this neglect with the belief in the methods of the natural sciences that pervades research in the social sciences. However, in the social sciences, experimental methods with their third-person stance have not been nearly as successful as they are in the natural sciences. Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000: 157) conclude 'that in the human sciences first-person accounts in the form of personal narratives provide a much richer source of data than do third-person distal observations'.

Lack of ecological validity.   Like Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), van Lier (2000) questions the dominance of rationalist and empiricist assumptions that dominate the field of SLL. He argues for ecological approaches to the study of SLL that see language alongside other semiotic systems and do not overlook the connection between cognitive and social processes. In language testing, concerns about ecological validity have also given rise to more holistic, qualitative testing procedures (Bachman 2000). Unfortunately, ultimate attainment research has, as a paradigm, focused almost exclusively on experimentally elicited speech. In this, it has been guided by the assumption that successful competence and performance are nothing more than the production of some sounds in an experimental setting or the evaluation of some grammatical structures. As a result, we know next to nothing about the strategies expert L2

users employ to integrate language with other semiotic systems or how social processes impact upon their achievements.

In sum, the methods typically employed in ultimate attainment research have, as a whole, served to render successful L2 users and their ability invisible. A variety of methodological decisions has conspired against making them visible: 'near-native' or 'native-like' speakers have never been allowed to leave the shadow of the native speaker; only a very limited number of linguistic features has been looked at; the study of production has been privileged to the detriment of perspectives that would also put the perception of expert L2 users on the spot; experimental methods have been favoured over ethnographic approaches that tap into the insider knowledge of advanced L2 users; and, finally, ultimate attainment has rarely, if ever, been studied holistically, as embedded in a range of meaning-making systems and social processes. My own research has been designed to balance this methodological lopsidedness in the following ways: I am relying on insiders' accounts of what being successful L2 users means to them. Consequently, my research questions as well as my results are derived from the data. The focus on passing comes from the participants themselves. In the following, I will first describe the group of people who consider themselves expert L2 users and discuss the age and context of their first exposure to their L2. I will then attempt an ethnographic description of passing as a form of high attainment in L2 learning and use. My aim in this is twofold: to provide a description of passing practices from an insider perspective, and, at the same time, to provide an explanation for the fact that passing is often overlooked in SLL research.

3. ULTIMATE ATTAINMENT AND AGE

Despite rising interest in advanced L2 learners, it is still probably fair to say that many SLT researchers and educators have doubts that L2 users who learnt their L2 after the onset of puberty can ever pass for native speakers. Many of those who concede the possibility of passing, consider passers as freaks. Cook, for instance, comments:

> Whether or not one accepts that some L2 users can pass for native speakers, these passers form an extremely small percentage of L2 users. Research with this group documents the achievements of a few unusual people, such as those described by Bongaerts et al. (1995), as typical of human beings as are Olympic high jumpers or opera singers. (Cook (1999: 191)

The expert L2 English users in Bongaerts et al. (1995), who were rated as indistinguishable from native speakers of British English by L1 English judges, are Dutch EFL teachers at the tertiary level: 'With the exception of one subject, who was a student of English at the graduate level, these subjects were lecturers who taught English at the graduate level at a Dutch university or teacher-training institute' (Bongaerts et al. 1997: 452). While this does not seem like

such an exceptional background, those few researchers who work with highly proficient L2 users invariably frame them as 'exceptional', 'precocious', 'talented' or 'special' (e.g. Ioup et al. 1994; Novoa, Fein and Obler 1988; Obler and Gjerlow 1999; Schneiderman and Desmarais 1988). In contrast to the consensus in the field, I believe that highly proficient L2 users are not extremely rare exceptions, but more common than is generally assumed. This belief is based upon the following observations: from 1997 to 1999 I collected conversational data for a sociolinguistic study of the linguistic practices of bilingual couples (see Piller 2001b, in press, for a full description of that research). One partner in these relationships had English as his/her first language, and the other one German. As part of my research I had asked volunteer couples to self-record one of their conversations and let me have the tape. As most couples were reluctant to record an everyday conversation, I suggested a list of possible topics for them to address in their conversations. The topics I suggested included how they had come to choose a language as a couple, if and how each partner had learnt the other partner's language, what they liked and disliked about each other's countries and cultures, and whether they were bringing up their children bilingually. My suggestions contained no reference whatsoever to issues of native and non-native speaker status or to 'passing for a native speaker'. As a matter of fact, I had only a marginal interest in such issues when I compiled my set of suggestions for the couples' conversations in mid-1997. Imagine my surprise when I found that 17 out of 38 conversations addressed the question of passing, and that 27 out of 73 individuals[2] claimed they had achieved high-level proficiency in their L2 and could pass for native speakers in certain contexts. Certainly not a negligible minority! Of the 17 couples who addressed passing without any prompt whatsoever, ten claimed that both partners could pass for native speakers of their L2 on occasion, while seven couples reported that only one partner had achieved such high-level L2 proficiency. This strong interest in and concern about passing for a native speaker expressed by my interlocutors without prompting, struck a chord with my own experiences as an L2 user and the conversations I have had with many other highly proficient L2 speakers. Table 1 provides the age of first exposure to the target language for those participants in the bilingual couples project who brought up passing in their conversations and claimed they could pass for native speakers.

The critical factor in the assumption that late learners rarely become expert L2 users and can pass for native speakers is age. Table 1 therefore presents information about the age of first exposure for all the participants in my study who consider themselves highly successful learners and claim to pass for native speakers in some contexts. The 'FL-Age' column provides information when instruction in the L2 first began, and the 'SL-Age' column provides information when the L2 was first encountered naturally. The average age at which instruction began is 11.7 years, with the youngest beginning at 10 and the oldest at 22. Four informants never received any formal instruction in their

Table 1: Age of the participants at first exposure to the target language

Couple code[1]	Name[2]	L1[3]	Age	FL-Age[4]	SL-Age[5]
d7	Felicia	E	31		26
	Matthias	G	32	10	19
d18	Astrid	G	26	10	21
	Jill	E	33	13	20
d23	Joanne	E	40	11	20
	Heinz	G	40	12	22
d25	Teresa	E	23	17	20
	Max	G	25	10	19
d27	Natalie	G	35	10	19
	Steven	E	35		17
n1	Gerda	G	40	11	
	Dennis	E	50	13	24
u1	Corinna	G	28	12	16
	Jordan	E	28	20	19
u3	Rita	G	32	10	24
	Jens	D	35	10	23
u4	Hannah	G	30	10	15
	Allan	E	33		23
u5	Kate	E	51	16	16
	Ernst	G	54	12	21
d1	Paola	G	26	10	24
d8	Meredith	E	41	12	24
d13	Christine	G	32	10	19
d24	Amy	E	44		19
g2	Maren	G	35	10	21
g3	Doris	G	38	10	24
g4	Marga	G	37	10	29
Average				11.7	20.9

[1] Each participating couple was assigned a letter-number code. The letter identifies the country of residence at the time of data collection (d=Germany; g=UK; n=Netherlands; u=USA). The ten couples who claimed that both partners had achieved high-level proficiency in their L2 come first, followed by the seven who claimed that only one partner had.

[2] All the names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.

[3] 'E' stands for English, 'G' for German, and 'D' for Danish.

[4] Age of first exposure to the L2 as a foreign language (FL) in an FL classroom. If the informant never received any formal instruction in the target language, the cell is left blank.

[5] Age of first exposure to the L2 in a naturalistic setting. Stays of less than a month's duration have been excluded from this count. If the informant never lived in the target country for any prolonged period, the cell is left blank.

target language at all. The average age at which the L2 was first encountered naturally is significantly higher at 20.9 years, with the youngest being 15 at the time, and the oldest 29.

The influence of the age when instruction began on the high achievement of the participants is difficult to gauge. However, it is interesting to note that the average age at which instruction began is significantly lower for the English as a Second Language (ESL) users (those who have German as their L1, and Jens, the L1 Danish speaker) than for the German as a Second Language (GSL) users (10.4 versus 14.6 years). The average age at which the L2 was first encountered in a natural setting is almost identical for both these groups (21.1 vs. 20.7 years). Thus, it would seem that the German (and Danish) educational systems should give ESL learners a head start over GSL learners from Britain and the U.S.A., where German is taught less regularly and, if it is taught, usually starts at a later age. However, the successful ESL users do not significantly outnumber the successful GSL users (16 vs. 11). The instructional experience for all the ESL learners is very similar, at least in its early phases: they first received EFL instruction in the classroom between the ages of 10 and 12 in fifth to seventh grade. Until age 19 (13th grade is the final year in high school for most German students), they received seven to nine years of EFL tuition, for an average of five hours per week during the school year.

There is no such regular instruction pattern for the GSL users: they started later and received instruction for shorter periods (many of them had attended intensive courses of less than half-a-year's duration). Dennis (n1) and Meredith (d8), for instance, also started formal German learning at such a relatively young age (13 and 12 respectively). However, their formal training lasted only for two school years. Despite this discrepancy, there are almost as many successful GSL users as there are ESL users. It seems that the age at which instruction began is rather irrelevant to eventual success in learning the L2 to very high levels. My data tentatively suggest that the learners' motivation and agency, the control they have over their own learning might be much more important than the age at which they begin. Many of the ESL speakers – who started to learn early but had little control over their own learning – evaluate their instructional experience rather negatively. Teresa (d25), for instance, relates the following about her partner Max's EFL instruction: 'and Max grew up as a German-speaker. and- and then @ learnt English in school. for a really, really long time, nine years or so? or seven years? in any case, for an incredibly long time, and he says he didn't learn a thing with all that. and that he forgot everything straight away'.[3] Matthias (d7) is just as candid when he evaluates his EFL classes in school: 'I learnt it more or less in school. actually, I didn't get good marks because I didn't see a point in it. [. . .] I only started to learn some vocabulary when I was about to move to the States'.

If the age at which they first encountered their L2 in the classroom means widely different experiences for different participants, this is even more so for the

age at which they first encountered their L2 in a natural setting. An age as set forth in a table simply fails, in many ways, to do justice to the lived experiences of my interlocutors. In the following I will discuss the cases of Rita, Hannah, Kate, Christine, Gerda and Steven as examples of the different contexts that 'age of first exposure to the L2 in a naturalistic setting' implies.

Rita (u3) first encountered her L2 English through foreign language instruction at age 10 in fifth grade. She continued to receive EFL instruction until age 19. Five years later, at 24, she permanently moved to the U.S. and learnt English naturally from then on. However, between age 17 and 22 she had an American boyfriend, with whom she used English regularly and she also visited the U.S. four times for a few weeks each during that period. Thus, although she did not live in the target country until age 24, she learnt and used English naturally in at least one context (private communication with her boyfriend) prior to that.

From age 15, Hannah (u4) spent two months each year in the U.S. and can thus be said to have started to acquire the language naturally then. However, she spent those two months with her German-speaking aunt and her German-speaking family. Thus, she continued to use German in the family domain even during those annual stays in the target country. At age 21 she moved to the U.S. permanently and claims that that was the point when she became fully proficient: 'My company sent me to Boston, and then I had to use English night and day. Working in English. And that's really when it started, when I became really proficient . . . yes'. Two years later she moved back to Germany with her new American partner, Allan, who acquired German there naturally over the following three-and-a-half year period. At the time of data collection they had been back in the U.S. for four years, and used German exclusively amongst themselves and with their children, as they wanted to raise their children bilingually in English and German by exposing the children to German at home and to English in public.

Kate (u5) grew up in the U.S. and studied Spanish in high school and, at 16, wanted to spend a year abroad as an exchange student in a Spanish-speaking country. However, because of some mix-up in the exchange agency she was sent to Switzerland. She started to take formal German lessons two months before her departure, and then continued to take lessons in Standard German while acquiring Swiss German naturally during her year in Switzerland. Back in the U.S., she studied German at the university and became a German teacher herself. From age 26 to 30 she spent another four years in Switzerland, teaching English there. Since then she has been living in the U.S., where she has created a German-dominant environment for herself: she uses German with her husband and their children, with most of their friends, and in her work as a high school German teacher.

Christine (d13) grew up in Germany and started to live in an English-speaking community when she married her British husband at age 19. She says about herself: '. . . but I think over the years, over fourteen years, living

with the British communities erm I can't consider myself German anymore'. Nevertheless, she lived in Germany at the time of data collection and only a few out of those 14 years with the British communities had been spent in Britain and Northern Ireland, and the remainder in Germany and Cyprus. In all these places, she had lived in British Army compounds, which provide an exclusively English-speaking environment irrespective of the country they are in.

Gerda (n1) is the only self-identified expert ESL user who has never spent any extended time in an English-speaking country. She studied English formally as a foreign language from age 11 to 19. For the next ten years she had hardly any contact with English at all, apart from conducting some of her business correspondence as a sales manager in English. However, at age 29, she met her husband and they have been speaking English together since – despite the fact that he had been living in Germany for 15 years at that point and claims that his German had been native-like for some time already. For the past five years, they have lived in the Netherlands where they mainly move in a community of British expatriates. Gerda describes her English as poor at the time of first meeting her husband, while Dennis describes his German at that time as flawless. It seems counter-intuitive that they should choose English as their common language under these circumstances. This may either be due to a discrepancy between self-reports and actual practice, or it may be due to a preference of German speakers for speaking English with English speakers – no matter how poor their English or how good their interlocutors' German. This tendency of German speakers to select English as their language of choice in cross-linguistic encounters is commented upon by virtually all the English speakers who were interviewed for this project and is in line with the high valorisation of English in many other German contexts (Piller 2001c).

Steven (d27) had not received any formal instruction in German when he first came to Germany as an exchange student at age 17. However, German was actually his first language. He grew up in the U.S., as the son of German immigrants. His parents used to speak German to him but from 'very little' onwards he refused to speak German and they accommodated his preference and switched to English with him. He says: '. . . by the time I was eighteen I really- I could understand some. but I had forgotten most of it. and I had to relearn it, yeah- as a second language'.

These examples indicate that the age of first exposure to the target language in both an instructional and naturalistic setting means significantly different experiences for different L2 users. If the age when instruction began mattered very much, then there should be significantly more expert ESL users than GSL users because the German (and one Danish) participants began instruction significantly earlier than their British and American peers. Furthermore, the age of migration is not necessarily a good indicator for linguistic practices, either: some participants create an L2 environment for themselves in their native countries (Christine and Kate, and partly Rita), while others create an L1

environment in their adopted country (Hannah). It is also important to note that many participants distinguish between a time when they started to learn the language, and a time when they 'really' began to learn the language. Max and Matthias, for instance, received instruction in English from age 10 onwards, but they 'really' began learning English when they spent a study abroad year in the U.S. at age 19. Steven, on the other hand, acquired German as his first language from his mother, but gave it up, and 'really' started it as an L2 at age 17. These distinctions made by my informants between 'beginning' and 'really beginning' point to their own involvement in their learning process: they may have received instruction but it only began to matter when they took charge of their own learning.

I now turn to the participants' accounts of passing. I will first suggest that passing is a (temporary) performance rather than a quality of being, and then go on to discuss passing in relation to sociolinguistic variation, to the medium, and to the audience, and I will finally focus my attention on the evaluation of passing.

4. PASSING AS A PERFORMANCE

The statement that 'these passers form an extremely small percentage of L2 users' quoted above implies that passing is a quality of being, something people are. However, my interlocutors suggest that passing is an act, something they do, a performance that may be put on or sustained for a limited period only. As such it is similar to dialect stylisation, which Coupland (2001: 345) characterizes as 'the knowing deployment of culturally familiar styles and identities that are marked as deviating from those predictably associated with the current speaking context'. However, expert L2 users do not stylise their speech so that it deviates from the default in a given context, rather, the aim is to match the default as closely as possible. Passing is thus a performance that is typical of first encounters, often service interactions, and each new encounter may present a new challenge to test one's performance. In an interview with Birgit Szymanski, a German editorial board member of *The Bilingual Family Newsletter*, she is asked about her study abroad experience in Britain:

> **What is your fondest memory of England?**
> Ever since my first visit I have made an enormous effort to get rid of a German accent. When I first arrived at York everybody noticed something foreign in my pronunciation and took me for an American. After a few months people thought I was Scottish, which I saw as a big step towards my target accent. Just before the end of the year I ended up having a chat with an elderly couple from York and they were actually convinced that I was from Durham, which is not far from York. Can you imagine how proud I was? (Anonymous 1997)

Many of the bilingual couples in my corpus discuss for how long they can sustain a passing act. The following excerpt from the conversation between Hannah and Allan (u4) is a case in point:

Allan	you've got hardly any accent at all because you started learning early.
Hannah	yes, but I've still got one.
Allan	sometimes it takes people about 15 minutes or so. people think, hm, maybe she's got an accent.
Hannah	well, not quite that long. recently I was with people in a friend's shop and she said, here, this is my friend, she's German, too. and then they said, *really?* and then I had to- I said to them, oh yes, when I speak some more, you'll notice. and then they immediately said- erm heard it quite clearly.
Allan	well yes, if they listen carefully.

The example clearly points to the influence of perception on passing practices: as soon as Hannah's interlocutors *know* that she is an L2 speaker, they *perceive* her accent. Many of the couples' conversations in my corpus have such a routine in which they ponder upon the length of the sustainability of their passing acts. Typically, they cannot quite agree on the issue and the native-speaking partners estimate that their partners can sustain their performances for longer than the L2 users themselves do. Such differences may be the result of politeness practices where each partner compliments the other and downplays their own achievements. However, it is also an indicator that passing depends in many ways upon the audience (see below).

In sum, expert L2 users describe passing as a performance that is only relevant to a very specific interactional context: that of first encounters. I suggest that this is so because people often prefer the unmarked or default social roles in a given context (i.e. native rather than foreigner). As a matter of fact, sometimes passing is easiest achieved by not saying anything at all, in which case it does not even involve a particularly high level of linguistic skill. Thus, passing as it occurs in naturalistic settings would not be a good indicator of high-level proficiency from an outsider's perspective. However, from an insider's perspective, highly proficient L2 users can measure their personal attainment in terms of their success in passing and the length of their passing act. The sense of achievement that many L2 speakers feel when they have managed an extended conversation without their origin having been revealed or having been made a topic of the interaction is best expressed by Birgit Szymanski in the interview quoted above: 'Can you imagine how proud I was?'

5. PASSING AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION

In order to pass for a native, my interlocutors exhibit high levels of awareness of regional and social variation within a language. While ultimate attainment research usually pits standard languages against each other, expert L2 speakers use their knowledge of linguistic variation, and that of their interlocutors strategically. Joanne and Heinz (d23), for instance, met 20 years ago and have since divided their time between their two hometowns, Manchester and Hamburg. Both have become indistinguishable from natives of these cities:

Heinz in the beginning people used to say they couldn't guess where you came from. but they usually said that you weren't from Hamburg. in the meantime, however, there is hardly anyone who can really distinguish that you don't come from Hamburg, right?

Joanne yes. the same goes for you when you are in England. you are not recognized for a foreigner. yes, we've acquired each other's dialects and slangs. of our hometowns and regions. @ of our partner cities.[4]

What is particularly noteworthy about Joanne's German is that she uses stereotypical features of Hamburg dialect such as word-initial /sp/ and /st/ instead of Standard German /ʃp/ and /ʃt/ much more frequently than does her husband, or, indeed, most native Hamburgers, as the feature is on the wane among native users. Her usage might thus be considered a form of hypercorrection (Labov 1966). Hypercorrection is frequently seen as an outsider's misreading of the social value of a particular linguistic form (e.g. Baugh 1992; Lo 1999). However, it is difficult to interpret Joanne's heavy use of word-initial /sp/ and /st/ as a misreading because it is this heavy use which warrants her as an insider in the eyes, or rather ears, of other insiders. Given her desire 'not to stand out', which she stresses repeatedly throughout the conversation, it seems likely that she is very aware of the covert local prestige of word-initial /sp/ and /st/ while her husband, whose native status is a given, has no need to flag his authenticity.

The fact that all speakers need to situate their performance within a range of sociolinguistic varieties and that L2 users may strategically employ stereotypical features characteristic of a particular variety in order to pass has, to my knowledge, so far not been noted at all in the literatures of applied linguistics. However, it is receiving increased attention in sociolinguistics where dialect styling and stylisation are the focus of ever-increasing attention (e.g. Bell 1999; Coupland 2001). The observation that most linguistic theorizing is 'based on *standardized* forms of languages, rather than on the variable forms of naturalistic speech' (Milroy and Milroy 1997: 47; italics in the original) is certainly true for ultimate attainment research. As native speakers themselves also mostly only have a vague knowledge of varieties they may have little or no first-hand experience with, this type of passing may actually involve more of a sociolinguistic knowledge component (something that ultimate attainment research rarely looks for) and less of a phonological component (that may be looked for too often). In a plurinational language (e.g. Ammon 1996) like English, where even native speakers usually only have the vaguest ideas about the characteristics of other national varieties, this form of passing is certainly easier to achieve than in 'mononational' languages. Thus, when I, as an ESL speaker, lived in the U.S., I was sometimes taken for an Irish speaker ('you can't hide that Irish Brogue' as a flight attendant once said to me) and in Australia I am often taken to be an American. L2 users sometimes choose highly stereotyped varieties as their target accents, such as Joanne, who targets the local dialect of Hamburg, which is on the wane among native users. Another frequent

choice by the L2 German speakers is Swabian, an Alemannic dialect. Jill (d18), for instance, claims it is easy for her to pass for a Swabian in Bavaria, where she lives:

Jill   yes because it's all sh. *woish?*[5] [@@@
Astrid   [@@@
Jill   we sometimes have big arguments about Swabian. @@
Astrid   yeah because you think you know exactly what Swabian is like but then you
          just get it all wrong.

Astrid, her partner, begs to differ because Swabian is her L1 and she knows it well, but for speakers from another dialect area, such as myself, Jill's performance is flawless. Passing is thus not necessarily an authentic performance but rather one that coincides with the stereotypes of the audience, a form of 'referee design' (Bell 1999). Barret (1999: 318) makes the same point when he writes about the passing performances of drag queens:

> Audience assumptions and expectations may crucially help to co-construct a performance that successfully conveys a particular identity regardless of the accuracy of the linguistic performance when compared to the behavior of 'authentic' holders of the identity in question.

Marga's husband (g4), for instance, claims she can pass by virtue of the fact that she does not sound like a stereotypical German in Britain: '. . . the other thing is, of course, that you don't come across as particularly German. cause everybody here in this country imagines Germans talk like sis and say well, s- s train is seven minutes late. why? why is that? and you don't sound like that at all, do you?' The stereotypes he alludes to refer to a linguistic stereotype (i.e. the substitution of [ð] and [θ], which are not part of the phoneme inventory of German, with [s]) as well as a cultural stereotype (i.e. hyperpunctuality and intolerance of lateness).

Some passers do not even choose a native target variety such as a stereotypical dialect. All they do not want to give away is their L1 background. Thus, successful L2 users do not necessarily aim to pass for native speakers. Rather, they just don't want to be perceived as members of a particular national group right away. Indeed, these people are very aware that they will be perceived stereotypically if they are identified with a particular national group while overseas. So they prefer not to be reduced to their original national identity. At the same time, they do not necessarily want to be perceived as native speakers, either, because that would negate their achievement in learning an L2 to a very high level and being interesting as a person from somewhere else. Allan (u4) expresses these feelings quite clearly when he speaks about the way in which he wants to be seen in Germany:

Hannah   with you it's really difficult to say because you don't have a typical
         American-
Allan   I know. I can hear that myself.

Hannah yes.

Allan I do notice when an American speaks German. I can hear that immediately, and I find that quite terrible.

Hannah uhmhu.

Allan and that's why . . . yes, I understand, I've tried-

Hannah strangely enough you never had that, not even in the beginning.

Allan yes.

Hannah nothing, so-

Allan I really fought it with some- erm the typical er. but-

Hannah yes, exactly.

Allan had to. good god, that took so long until I-

Hannah really?

Allan yes. and now, I know I can't avoid that I'm a foreigner. but I enjoy it that some people don't know where from. they think-

Hannah no, exactly.

Allan sometimes Italy or- they don't have a clue. and I quite enjoy that.

Hannah uhmhu.

Allan I'd never hide it completely. no.

Solveig, whom I interviewed for another research project on cross-cultural communication, lives in Hamburg and her L1 is Danish, but she can easily pass for a German speaker for extended interactions. She explains that she prefers to make it clear very early in an interaction that she is not a native. 'If I don't,' she says, 'some reference to something every German knows will come up, and I won't understand, and they'll think I'm stupid'. In order to protect one part of her self-image (that she's an intelligent and well-informed person) she has to trade in another aspect of her personality (successful L2 speaker who can pass for an L1 speaker). Whether consciously or unconsciously, many L2 speakers seem to make such choices, and weigh the comparative benefits and disadvantages of passing.

Again, it is easy to see why the strategic use of non-standard varieties in passing practices, serves to render passing invisible in research. In their passing practices, expert L2 users consciously draw on their knowledge of linguistic variation, often in the form of stereotypical markers. Research projects that focus only on standard pronunciation and grammar are prone to overlook much of high-level L2 ability. Significantly, Ioup et al. (1994), one of the rare studies to describe high-level L2 ability, did test the sociolinguistic perceptions of the two L2 speakers of Egyptian Arabic they studied. Interestingly, their consultants' judgements (as to whether a speech sample was Egyptian Arabic or not) were more precise than those of some of the native speaking judges. As L2 speakers, just like L1 speakers, need to negotiate a range of linguistic varieties in their daily lives the research focus on standard languages may be quite mistaken.

6. PASSING AS A FUNCTION OF THE MEDIUM

So far I have been treating passing as a linguistic performance that is intricately linked to spoken language. In this account the passing performance stands and falls with the speaker's accent. However, initial encounters may also occur in written and electronic media. The issue of disembodied identity performances in cyberspace has received some interest in feminist linguistics (e.g. Hall 1996; Sutton 1999). However, the performance of linguistic identities such as native and non-native speaker has been disregarded. It is one single comment that drew my attention to expert L2 users in cyberspace. This is an e-mail message from an American woman who volunteered to tape a conversation but later on decided against it. She writes about how she met her German husband:

> when my husband first arrived he could type English well and knew alot of words just he did not know how to pronounce them . . it has been a bit of a challenge . . we met on the internet and while we spent hundreds of hours typing . . never dawned on me he would not understand English or pronounce the words. .

While I cannot further comment on the proficiency of this person, what is clear is that his written command of English is (was?) better than his spoken command of the language, and while he does not draw attention to his language in written interactions, he does in his spoken interactions. It seems that the focus on spoken language, and particularly on accent, contributes to making high-level achievements invisible. In speech the perceptual salience of the accent overrides other measures of competence and performance, and speech overrides written language. One of the few authors to focus on highly successful L2 writers is Coulmas (1997, 1999). He draws attention to acclaimed L2 writers such as Paul Celan, who wrote his poetry in his L2 German, Joseph Conrad, who wrote his novels in his L2 English, or Salman Rushdie, another L2 English writer, as examples of high-level L2 achievement. Generally, we do not know the extent of L2 literature because it is much more difficult for L2 writers to get published than it is for native speakers (Abbey, Brinson, Dov, Malet and Taylor 1995). Indeed, some researchers into the CPH have claimed that late learners can achieve perfect command of the written language, and that pronunciation may be the only aspect of language use that is subject to maturational constraints. Scovel (1988: 64–67) calls a mismatch between perfect written command of an L2 and pronunciation that is deviant from the target the 'Joseph Conrad Phenomenon', while Brown (1987: 46) dubs it the 'Henry Kissinger effect'. In sum, a focus on the spoken language, and particularly accent, may serve to obscure forms of passing, and high-level achievement more generally, in writing. This is even more so for electronic communication, despite the fact that cyberspace has been heralded as the medium for passing performances par excellence by some theorists (e.g. Haraway 1985).

7. PASSING AS A FUNCTION OF THE AUDIENCE

L2 speakers cannot pass for native speakers beyond initial encounters, once their 'authentic' identity is known to their audience. However, their interlocutors may, or may not, choose to concentrate upon their status as L2 speakers as a major feature of their identity. All my interviewees report that their linguistic performance differs perceptibly with their interlocutors. Usually, but not always, they comment that it is their partner with whom they can express themselves best in their L2. Ernst and Kate (u5), for instance, have been married for 31 years. For them, their involvement with each other and each other's languages started simultaneously. Kate says:

> Kate   we were both happy that we could speak German, and our relationship started with drinking coffee and speaking, and so language was very important to us. and whenever we are having a serious conversation, it needs to be in German. otherwise it doesn't go well, and it doesn't feel right.

Both, Kate and Ernst, have achieved high-level proficiency in their L2s. However, Ernst observes that Kate is at her most creative in her L2 in a particular audience constellation: when she is with him and another German friend:

> Ernst   we've got a really good acquaintance from Germany, really a friend. with whom we spend a lot of time, and who is a big feminist. and when we gossip about people, or bitch about them, it often happens that Kate says something that hits the nail on the head. and our friend also feels like that, like, you see, there are two Germans sitting here and talking, and the American gets to say exactly the right thing.

This excerpt is important in two respects: first, because it shows that high-level achievement in the L2 may be audience-specific. The more 'at home' someone is with their interlocutors, the better the performance. It might be argued that partners in an intimate relationship meet as individuals rather than as representatives of a group (e.g. 'native' vs. 'non-native' speaker). However, family research consistently points to the fact that intimate partners meet both as individuals and as group representatives (e.g. Dryden 1999; Gubrium and Holstein 1990; Williams 1984). Thus, the private context does not invalidate the L2 users' achievements. Instead, private contexts may enable high achievement. Again, this feature will in most research contexts serve to render high attainment invisible because: (a) L2 use is rarely studied as 'audience-design' (Bell 1984, 1999); and (b) public speech is privileged over private speech in most linguistic research.

Ernst's comment is also important in a further respect: it provides a clue as to how expert L2 users themselves evaluate their proficiency. It is creative use of the language that they value particularly highly: saying the right thing at the right moment, finding a snappy phrase, hitting the nail on the head. Another example of such usage can be found in Joanne's excerpt above where she refers

to Hamburg and Manchester as 'unsere Partnerstaedte', which literally translates as 'our twin cities', but is here used in a non-lexicalised meaning as 'the cities of our partners'. She clearly flags this creative use of the term with a slight laugh before she uses it so that her listeners will not take it to be an error. Indeed, there is always a danger that creative linguistic usage by known non-native speakers will be misunderstood as an error. Egon, another interviewee for the crosscultural communication project, and L1 speaker of German, for instance, relates of his American host family: 'At dinner time they had a comical routine which involved making fun of the grandmother and her dentures. However, when I attempted the routine, too, the joke misfired because they thought I had misunderstood something and proceeded to correct my error'. Likewise, Davies (1991: 13) observes that linguistic usage that goes unnoticed if it comes from known native speakers 'might well be corrected and/ or stigmatised if the speakers were known/thought to be non native speakers'. L2 speakers may thus find themselves in a double-bind situation: language creativity, which they value highly as an expression of high achievement, may be evaluated as errors, and thus a measure of low achievement, by their interlocutors. This observation has two implications for ultimate attainment research: first, the creative use of language as a characteristic of advanced proficiency deserves more attention than it has received to date and second, some research under double-blind conditions might be called for to ensure that it is not the researcher who 'creates' non-native performances.

8. THE EVALUATION OF PASSING

In popular ideas about passing for a native speaker, the prototypical passer is an impostor, the spy. This misconceived prototype certainly contributes to the overall perception of passers as rare human specimens. However, as I have shown, the passing of expert L2 users is contextual rather than identity-related. Spying as passing prototype involves deceit: a person's 'true' identity is hidden and a 'fake' identity is assumed. Like any other form of deceit, it is negatively evaluated: to be a 'language cheat' is as morally wrong as putting credentials you do not have on your CV. However, as I have shown, in passing as a performance no deceit is involved. In initial encounters, expert L2 users impose a passing performance upon themselves as a test of their abilities. The passing act comes to a close when the encounter ends or when the game is given away. In private contexts, with a sympathetic audience, the passing performance is just the highest form of linguistic performance that expert L2 speakers are capable of but it does not involve any form of mistaken identity at all. The audience knows that the performer is a highly skilled bilingual and native or non-native identities just do not matter in this context. Thus, no one is deliberately misled. As a consequence, ideologies of passing, on the one hand, and passing in real life contexts, on the other, are two quite distinct phenomena. However, the negative judgements that deceptive passing attracts are carried

over to the latter, and we can assume that such judgements further contribute to rendering passing practices invisible. As L2 speakers share the ideologies of society at large – that passing means engaging in hiding one's 'true' identity for deceptive purposes – they might be reluctant to admit to non-deceptive passing practices. Allan's comment quoted above: 'I'd never hide it [=his native, American accent] completely. no.' may be motivated by such an internalised evaluation.

Queer theorists celebrate the drag, a gender passing performance, as liberating because it 'exposes the imitative nature of gender, showing that gender is an "imitation without an origin" (Butler 1990: 138)' (Barret 1999: 315). Is it time to re-evaluate linguistic passing in the same way? The passing practices I have described so far certainly – if unintentionally – undermine the primacy of the native speaker, and could well be celebrated as exposing the native speaker fallacy in SLL. However, consider the following two cases:[6]

> Case A: An advertising agency in Western Europe produces promotional films in English for international companies. These films are distributed with the companies' international subsidiaries and retailers, mainly in Asia and Latin America. The advertising agency has a job opening for a native speaker of English to read the voice tracks. X, a refugee from an Eastern European country and expert L2 speaker of English desperately needs a job and decides to apply. He knows that he will have to explain his life-long residence in Eastern Europe and his non-English-sounding name and lies that his mother had been an American communist who had chosen to live in Eastern Europe, and that's how he had come to grow up as a native speaker of English. He has a full sonorous voice and gets the job. In all the years in which he has held it since no one has ever questioned his native performance, and everything seems to go well. However, X feels he is living a lie and an ever-increasing cynicism mars his otherwise beautiful personality.

> Case B: An EFL Institute in an Asian country markets its courses with the promise that all its classes, except those at the beginners level, are being taught by native-speaking teachers. Accordingly, it charges significantly higher fees than its competitors who employ local teachers. The local teachers hold degrees in TESOL, ESL or Applied Linguistics from American or Australian universities but their salaries are significantly lower than those of their native-speaking colleagues who are usually travellers with no language or teaching qualifications whatsoever. Whenever there is a shortage of native speakers, one of the local teachers is designated 'American- (or Australian-) born' and pretends to be a native speaker of English. The students, of course, never notice the difference. The salary of the teacher is not adjusted.

Like all the passing performances I have described in this article, these two cases undermine the common belief that late bilinguals cannot pass for native speakers. Of course they can, and, as these two cases show, even for quite extended periods, and in a range of contexts, and with a range of audiences. However, these cases poignantly raise ethical questions that result from the invisibility of expert L2 users: if advanced L2 speakers are widely believed not to exist, they may find themselves in situations in which they are forced to resort

to deceit in order to access some of the privileges associated with native speaker status, particularly of English, as the language which currently has the strongest symbolic currency (Bourdieu 1991) internationally.

9. IMPLICATIONS

This article deals with the passing practices of a group of L2 users who consider themselves highly successful in their SLL. While research with such people has tended to be experimental, I have argued for additional fresh methodological approaches deriving from the ethnography of communication which consider these people's own accounts of what it means to be an expert L2 user. Consequently, I tried to provide an insider account of what passing, as one particular manifestation of self-identified high-level ability, is and how it works according to passers themselves. Several of the characteristics of passing that were revealed clash with established beliefs about passing. Those characteristics include the following:

- While we look for a stable trait of 'near-native' speech, passing is a temporary performance.
- Passing is context-specific in that it is typical of first encounters, often service encounters. In those encounters expert L2 users are motivated to test their own skills. This motivation to perform may be offset by other motivations in other contexts.
- While researchers often look for expert L2 users who can pass for native speakers of the standard variety of the L2, the speakers themselves may choose to model their speech upon non-standard varieties (both native and non-native) of their L2.
- This form of passing entails both pronunciation skills and sociolinguistic knowledge.
- Conceiving of passing only as a spoken performance ignores passing practices in other media, particularly in the use of written language and in electronic media.
- Like all linguistic practices, passing practices, and advanced L2 speech more generally, are designed for a particular audience. If a person's L2 proficiency is significantly better in interactions with family and friends than in interactions with a strange researcher, high-level proficiency may be rendered invisible in research contexts.
- Popular ideas about passing as a form of deceit clash with the realities of passing practices I have outlined here. However, the negative value judgements that passing as deceit attracts are carried over to actual passing practices.
- In a range of language-related professions there are significant vested interests at stake in downplaying the incidence of high-level L2 abilities and passing practices.

As with gender and ethnic passing, passing for a native speaker questions and destabilises the categories of native and non-native speakers themselves. 'Native speaker' is no longer an identity category, and rather than being something that someone is, it becomes something that someone does. The flip side of passing for a native speaker, is passing for a non-native speaker. And, indeed, many of my participants find their original native identities challenged at times, for instance after prolonged absence from their L1 communities (see Piller 1999, 2001b for a fuller discussion of such cases).

Furthermore, my data suggest that age is not the critical factor in reaching high levels of L2 proficiency it is often assumed to be. Rather, personal motivation, choice and agency seem to be more crucial factors in ultimate attainment. Indeed, expert L2 users themselves often distinguish between a point in their lives when they first encountered their L2 and a point when they 'really' started to learn it. For many of my participants this latter point coincides with the time when they met their partner, but for others it is job-related or due to some other emerging interest in the target country and culture.

Finally, passing practices are only one aspect of successful L2 use. Fuller descriptions of high-level L2 ability and the linguistic practices it entails are urgently needed. A better understanding of what high-level L2 proficiency is, what it means to the people who have attained it, and how it can be achieved is sorely needed by educators, specifically SLT teachers and curriculum planners, worldwide. It would help to set up more realistic goals, and support SLL by presenting students with realistic role models of successful L2 users rather than the monolingual native speakers they can never be. To achieve this aim a better integration of the literatures of sociolinguistics, specifically those of linguistic gender and ethnic passing, of crossing studies and those of dialect styling and stylisation, with those of applied linguistics will be necessary.

NOTES

1. I am putting 'authentic' in scare quotes because I am arguing against essentialism throughout this article. However, as much as postmodern scholars argue against perceiving any aspect of identity as essential and authentic, identities are certainly treated as essential, dichotomous, stable and authentic by the general public.
2. Three of these 38 conversations were monologues rather than conversations, which results in 73 individual speakers.
3. Some of the excerpts I am quoting are originally in German. In the excerpts the following transcription conventions have been used:
   ,   clause final intonation ('more to come')
   .   sentence final falling intonation
   ?   sentence final rising intonation
   -      truncation
   . . . pause
   =   latch

       [overlap starts

       [. . .]   parts of the conversations have been edited out as irrelevant to the excerpt

       @   laughter

       CAPS   emphatic stress

       Italics code-switch

4.   Cf. my comments on the use of linguistic creativity in advanced L2 use below.

5.   Swabian *woish* is equivalent to English 'you know'; 'weisst Du' in Standard German.

6.   In both cases I will be as unspecific as possible to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors. However, I can safely vouch for the authenticity of the examples.

REFERENCES

Abbey, William, Charmian Brinson, R. Dov, Marion Malet and James Taylor (eds.). 1995. *Between Two Languages: German-Speaking Exiles in Great Britain 1933–45*. Stuttgart: Heinz.

Ammon, Ulrich. 1996. On comparing the centers of plurinational languages: The example of German. In Marlis Hellinger and Ulrich Ammon (eds.) *Contrastive Socio-linguistics*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 17–35.

Anonymous. 1997. Spotlight on the editorial board: Birgit Szymanski from Germany. *The Bilingual Family Newsletter* 14: 2.

Bachman, Lyle F. 2000. Modern language testing at the turn of the century: Assuring that what we count counts. *Language Testing* 17: 1–42.

Barret, Rusty. 1999. Indexing polyphonous identity in the speech of African American drag queens. In Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang and Laurel A. Sutton (eds.) *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 313–331.

Baugh, John. 1992. Hypocorrection: Mistakes in productions of vernacular African American English as a second dialect. *Language and Communication* 12: 317–326.

Bell, Allan. 1984. Language style as audience design. *Language in Society* 13: 145–204.

Bell, Allan. 1999. Styling the other to define the self: A study in New Zealand identity making. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 523–541.

Bialystok, Ellen. 1997. The structure of age: In search of barriers to second language acquisition. *Second Language Research* 13: 116–137.

Birdsong, David. 1992. Ultimate attainment in second language acquisition. *Language* 68: 706–755.

Birdsong, David (ed.). 1999. *Second Language Acquisition and the Critical Period Hypothesis*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Blackledge, Adrian. 2000. *Literacy, Power and Social Justice*. Stoke-on-Trent, U.K.: Trentham Books.

Bongaerts, Theo. 1999. Ultimate attainment in foreign language pronunciation: The case of very advanced late language learners. In David Birdsong (ed.) *Second Language Acquisition and the Critical Period Hypothesis*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 133–159.

Bongaerts, Theo, Susan Mennen and Frans van der Slik. 2000. Authenticity of pronunciation in naturalistic second language acquisition: The case of very advanced late learners of Dutch as a second language. *Studia Linguistica* 54: 298–308.

Bongaerts, Theo, Brigitte Planken and Erik Schils. 1995. Can late starters attain a native

accent in a foreign language? A test of the critical period hypothesis. In David Singleton and Zsolt Lengyel (eds.) *The Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition.* Clevedon, U.K.: Multilingual Matters. 30–50.

Bongaerts, Theo, Chantal Van Summeren, Brigitte Planken and Erik Schils. 1997. Age and ultimate attainment in the pronunciation of a foreign language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 19: 447–465.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power.* Cambridge: Polity.

Braine, George (ed.). 1999. *Non-Native Educators in English Language Teaching.* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Browder, Laura. 1999. 'One hundred percent American': How a slave, a janitor, and a former klansman escaped racial categories by becoming Indians. In Timothy B. Powell (ed.) *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context.* New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press. 107–138.

Brown, H. Douglas. 1987. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Bucholtz, Mary. 1995. From Mulatta to Mestiza: Passing and the linguistic reshaping of ethnic identity. In Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz (eds.) *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self.* New York, London: Routledge. 351–373.

Bucholtz, Mary. 1999. You da man: Narrating the racial other in the production of white masculinity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 443–460.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York, London: Routledge.

Cook, Vivian. 1992. Evidence for multicompetence. *Language Learning* 42: 557–591.

Cook, Vivian. 1999. Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly* 33: 185–209.

Coppieters, Rene. 1987. Competence differences between native and near-native speakers. *Language* 63: 544–573.

Coulmas, Florian. 1997. A matter of choice. In Martin Pütz (ed.) *Language Choices: Conditions, Constraints and Consequences.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 31–44.

Coulmas, Florian. 1999. Language masters: Defying linguistic materialism. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 137: 27–38.

Coupland, Nikolas. 2001. Dialect stylization in radio talk. *Language in Society* 30: 345–375.

Cranshaw, Alan Scot. 1998. A study of Anglophone native and near native linguistic and metalinguistic performance. *Dissertation Abstracts International* A 58/09: 3489.

Cutler, Cecilia A. 1999. Yorkville Crossing: White teens, hip hop and African American English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 428–442.

Davies, Alan. 1991. *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

DeKeyser, Robert M. 2000. The robustness of critical period effects in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 22: 499–533.

Dryden, Caroline. 1999. *Being Married, Doing Gender: A Critical Analysis of Gender Relationships in Marriage.* London: Routledge.

Egbo, Benedicta. 2000. *Gender, Literacy and Life Chances in Sub-Saharan Africa.* Clevedon, U.K.: Multilingual Matters.

Flege, James Emil. 1987. A critical period for learning to pronounce foreign languages? *Applied Linguistics* 8: 162–177.

Gubrium, Jaber F. and James A. Holstein. 1990. *What Is Family?* Mountain View, California: Mayfield.

Hall, Kira. 1995. Lip service on the fantasy lines. In Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz (eds.)

Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self. New York and London: Routledge. 183–216.

Hall, Kira. 1996. Cyberfeminism. In Susan C. Herring (ed.) *Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 147–170.

Haraway, Donna. 1985. A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s. *Socialist Review* 80: 65–107.

Heller, Monica. 1999. *Linguistic Minorities and Modernity: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography*. London: Longman.

Holland, Sharon P. 1999. 'From this moment forth, we are Black lesbians': Querying feminism and transgressing whiteness in consolidated's *Business of Punishment*. In Timothy B. Powell (ed.) *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context*. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press. 139–162.

Hornberger, Nancy H. 1988. *Bilingual Education and Language Maintenance: A Southern Peruvian Quechua Case*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands and Providence, Rhode Island: Foris.

Ioup, Georgette, Elizabeth Boustagui, Manal El Tigi and Martha Moselle. 1994. Re-examining the critical period hypothesis: A case study of successful adult SLA in a naturalistic environment. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 16: 73–98.

Kecskes, Istvan and Tunde Papp. 2000. *Foreign Language and Mother Tongue*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kouritzin, Sandra G. 1999. *Face[T]s of First Language Loss*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kramsch, Claire. 1997. The privilege of the non-native speaker. *PMLA* 112: 359–369.

Labov, William. 1966. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Lenneberg, E. 1967. *Biological Foundations of Language*. New York: Wiley.

Lippi-Green, Rosina. 1997. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States.* London: Routledge.

Liu, Jun. 1999. Non-native-English-speaking professionals in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly* 33: 85–102.

Lo, Adrienne. 1999. Codeswitching, speech community membership, and the construction of ethnic identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 461–479.

Long, Michael. 1990. Maturational constraints on language development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 12: 251–285.

McKay, Sandra Lee and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong. 1996. Multiple discourses, multiple identities: Investment and agency in second-language learning among Chinese adolescent immigrant students. *Harvard Educational Review* 66: 577–608.

Marinova-Todd, Stefka, D. Bradford Marshall and Catherine E. Snow. 2000. Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly* 34: 9–34.

Milroy, James and Lesley Milroy. 1997. Varieties and variation. In Florian Coulmas (ed.) *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell. 47–64.

Moyer, Alene. 1999. Ultimate attainment in L2 phonology: The critical factors of age, motivation, and instruction. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 21: 81–108.

Norton, Bonny P. 2000. *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. London: Longman.

Novoa, Loriana M., Deborah Fein and Loraine K. Obler. 1988. Talent in foreign languages: A case study. In Loraine K. Obler and Deborah Fein (eds.) *The Exceptional Brain: The Neuropsychology of Talent and Special Ability*. New York: Guilford. 294–302.

Obler, Loraine K. and Kris Gjerlow. 1999. *Language and the Brain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Patkowski, Mark S. 1980. The sensitive period for the acquisition of syntax in a second language. *Language Learning* 30: 449–472.

Patkowski, Mark S. 1990. Age and accent in a second language: A reply to James Emil Flege. *Applied Linguistics* 11: 73–89.

Pavlenko, Aneta. 1999. New approaches to concepts in bilingual memory. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 2: 209–230.

Pavlenko, Aneta and Adrian Blackledge (eds.). 2001. Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts (special issue of *International Journal of Bilingualism* 5). Twickenham, U.K.: Kingston Press.

Pavlenko, Aneta, Adrian Blackledge, Ingrid Piller and Marya Teutsch-Dwyer (eds.). 2001. *Multilingualism, Second Language Learning, and Gender*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Pavlenko, Aneta and James P. Lantolf. 2000. Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves. In James P. Lantolf (ed.) *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford, United Kingdom and New York: Oxford University Press. 155–177.

Piller, Ingrid. 1999. '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. 117–126.

Piller, Ingrid. 2001a. Who, if anyone, is a native speaker? *Anglistik: Mitteilungen des Verbandes Deutscher Anglisten* 12: 109–121.

Piller, Ingrid. 2001b. Linguistic intermarriage: Language choice and negotiation of identity. In Aneta Pavlenko, Adrian Blackledge, Ingrid Piller and Marya Teutsch-Dwyer (eds.) *Multilingualism, Second Language Learning and Gender*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 199–230.

Piller, Ingrid. 2001c. Identity constructions in multilingual advertising. *Language in Society* 30: 153–186.

Piller, Ingrid. In press. *Bilingual Couples Talk: The Discursive Construction of Hybridity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Polanyi, Livia. 1995. Language learning and living abroad: Stories from the field. In Barbara F. Freed (ed.) *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 271–291.

Rampton, Ben. 1995. *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents*. London: Longman.

Rampton, Ben. 1999a. Styling the Other: Introduction. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 421–427.

Rampton, Ben. 1999b. *Deutsch* in Inner London and the animation of an instructed language. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 480–504.

Rampton, Ben. 2001. Crossing. In Alessandro Duranti (ed.) *Key Terms in Language and Culture*. Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell. 49–51.

Schneiderman, Eta I. and C. Desmarais. 1988. The talented language learner: Some preliminary findings. *Second Language Research* 4: 91–109.

Scovel, Thomas. 1988. *A Time to Speak: A Psycholinguistic Inquiry into the Critical Period for Human Speech*. Cambridge: Newbury House.

Spolsky, Bernard. 2000. Language motivation revisited. *Applied Linguistics* 21: 157–169.

Strand, Elizabeth A. 1999. Gender perception influences speech processing. In Ursula

Pasero and Friederike Braun (eds.) *Wahrnehmung und Herstellung von Geschlecht: Perceiving and Performing Gender*. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag. 126–136.

Sutton, Laurel A. 1999. All media are created equal: Do-it-yourself identity in alternative publishing. In Mary Bucholtz, A. C. Liang and Laurel A. Sutton (eds.) *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*. Oxford, U.K. and New York: Oxford University Press. 163–180.

van Lier, Leo. 2000. From input to affordance: Social-interactive learning from an ecological perspective. In James P. Lantolf (ed.) *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford, U.K. and New York: Oxford University Press. 245–259.

White, Lydia and Fred Genesee. 1996. How native is near-native? The issue of ultimate attainment in adult second language acquisition. *Second Language Research* 12: 233–265.

Williams, Jenny A. 1984. Gender and intergroup behaviour: Towards an integration. *British Journal of Psychology* 23: 311–316.

Address correspondence to:

Ingrid Piller
Linguistics Department, F12
University of Sydney
Sydney
N.S.W. 2006
Australia

ingrid.piller@linguistics.usyd.edu.au