What second language learners can tell us about the native speaker: identifying and describing exceptions[1]

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Abstract

This paper argues that the native speaker is a necessary myth, useful as a goal or model but useless as a measure because it is not describable. Attempts to characterise the native speaker (childhood acquisition, intuitions about the idiolect, intuitions about the standard language, fluent spontaneous discourse, creative capacity, interpeting capacity) are shown to reduce to the first characteristic (childhood acquisition) and therefore to be circular (Davies 1991). Birdsong (1992) disputes the position taken up by Coppieters (1987) and Long (1990) namely that 'ultimate attainment' for the non-native speaker can never be equal to native speaker competence. Birdsong concludes from his study of French learners that 'ultimate attainment by non-natives can coincide with that of natives'(1992:739). Such non-natives are of course exceptional learners but the fact of their success indicates that the native speaker is as much a sociolinguistic construct as a developmental one.

Empirical data from two studies replicating Ross (1979) and Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) are reported as further evidence of the 'exceptional learner' status of non-native speakers of English. It is proposed that language proficiency tests could be used to illustrate ways of demonstrating the attainment of such exceptional learners and thereby illumine our understanding of the concept 'native speaker'.

1.   The problem of the Native Speaker

If the native speaker seems problematic as a goal, that may be because we are doubtful whether learners can ever reach that goal

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[1] A version of this paper was read at the 1996 meeting of AAAL in Chicago.

(the 'ultimate attainment' problem) or because we are not clear how to define the native speaker (the ideal or 'snark' problem). That is the subject of this article. I suggest that the native speaker is indeed a myth, but a necessary one and, because of the elusiveness of a definition, I argue that we need to turn on its head our usual procedure of examining the second language learner in terms of the native speaker and, instead, use information from the second language learner to illuminate our understanding of the native speaker.

2.   The problem in language proficiency testing

During the last 30 years there appears to have been a loss of nerve about the native speaker goal among language testers. Here is Robert Lado (1961)

> *When the (test) items have been written and the instructions prepared the test is ready for an experimental administration to native speakers of the language. ...Items eliciting the desired response from native speakers 95% of the time or better should probably be kept.* (Lado 1961: 93,4)

And now Lyle Bachman (1990):

> *there are serious problems in determining what kind of language use to consider as the 'native speaker' norm, while the question of what constitutes a native speaker, or whether we can even speak of individuals who are native speakers, is the subject of much debate.* (Bachman 1990: 248)

These are indeed serious problems, as Bachman reminds us, and the solution, that of delineating the language proficiency continuum from zero to ultimate attainment in terms of the native speaker, is, as he indicates, now in doubt. In doubt therefore are scales such as the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), now the Inter Agency Roundtable (ILR) and the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR) and the like, which typically fix a criterion of native speaker ability, thus:

FSI Level 6: Native pronunciation, with no trace of 'foreign accent'

FSI Level 6: Understands everything in both formal and colloquial speech to be expected of an educated native speaker

ASLPR Level 5: Able to use the second language as effectively as native speakers ('there is nothing about the way I speak that suggests I am not a native speaker')

3. The parallel with nation

Benedict Anderson's discussion of the concept nation as an 'imagined political community' provides a useful analogy to our consideration of the native speaker. He notes how difficult it is to define nation:

'It is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know more of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.   (Anderson 1991:6)

While the imagination may be sufficient for identifying with a nation, it will not do when we need to operationalise the native speaker. It is to that I now turn.

4. Defining the native speaker

The Native Speaker, like Lewis Carroll's snark, is a useful and enduring linguistic myth; again, like the snark, itself a product of the debate over idealism in philosophy, it must be taken with a large pinch of salt. Linguists may have given a special place to the native speaker as 'the only true and reliable source of language data,' (Ferguson 1983: vii) but there is little detailed discussion of the concept, which is often appealed to but difficult to track down. Full-length treatments of the topic (Coulmas 1981, Paikeday 1985, Davies 1991) are recent. Ferguson's argument has to do with language use rather than with language knowledge: 'much of the

world's verbal communication' he writes, 'takes place by means of languages which are not the users' mother tongue but their second, third or nth language, acquired one way or another and used when appropriate. This kind of language use merits the attention of linguists as much as do the more traditional objects of their research'(Ferguson op cit).

We can agree with Ferguson's desire that linguistics pay more attention to language use without agreeing with his dismissal of the native speaker: 'In fact the whole mystique of native speaker and mother tongue should preferably be quietly dropped from the linguist's set of professional myths about language'(ibid).

Theoretically, the Native Speaker concept is rich in ambiguity. It raises, quite centrally, the issue of the relation between the particular and the universal.

Responding to Paikeday (1985), Chomsky maintains that to question the difference between native and non-native is just pointless. Chomsky's argument depends on a rationalist opposition to 'incorrect metaphysical assumptions, in particular the assumption that among the things in the world there are languages or dialects, and that individuals come to acquire them' (Paikeday 1985: 49).

What such views indicate is the accuracy of Coulmas' statement that a tension exists between the flesh and blood and the idealisation definitions.

The practical importance of the term is emphasised by Paikeday (1985), pointing to the employment discrimination against those who lack the 'ideal' Native Speaker attributes: 'native speakership should not be used as a criterion for excluding certain categories of people from language teaching, dictionary editing, and similar functions' (Paikeday 1985: 88).

Paikeday's own solution seems to be to separate the ideal and the operative meanings of native speaker, making proficiency the criterion for employment, and personal history the criterion for ideal membership.

The challenge which Paikeday sets us is essentially which native speaker to choose, and lurking behind all such choices is

undoubtedly his dilemma of whether a new model (which can be supported by acknowledged proficiency) matches a distant 'historically authentic' model; for example Indian English models or Nigerian English models versus British or American models. But this dilemma is in fact just one example of the more general case. There is equally a dispute between the British and American models just as there is among other metropolitan models, and just also as there is between any Standard and other dialects. The important choice of a model therefore raises issues of acceptability, of currency and of intelligibility.

5.   The second language learner as native speaker

I now address the question of whether a second language learner can be/become a native speaker of that language. Let me suggest six criteria, to which I respond in turn:

5.1   Childhood acquisition

No, the second language learner does not acquire the target language in early childhood. If s/he does then s/he is a (bilingual) native speaker of both the first language (L1) and the target language (TL).

5.2   Intuitions about the individual's idiolectal grammar

Yes, it must be possible, with sufficient contact and practice, for the second language learner to gain access to intuitions about his/her own idiolectal grammar of the target language.

5.3   Intuitions about standard language grammar

Yes again, with sufficient contact and practice, the second language learner can gain access to the standard grammar of the target language. Indeed in many formal learning situations it is exactly through exposure to a TL standard grammar that the TL idiolectal grammar emerges, the reverse of L1 development.

5.4   Discourse and pragmatic control

Yes, there may indeed be a descriptive difference between native speaker and non-native speaker groups but it is not in any way explanatory: that is to say it in no way argues that a particular

second language learner cannot become a native speaker, given a favourable set of circumstances.

5.5 Creative performance

Yes again, with practice it must be possible for a second language learner to become an accepted creative writer or speaker in the TL. There are of course well known examples of such cases, for example Conrad, Becket and Senghor.

5.6 Interpreting and translating

Even though international organisations generally require that interpreters should interpret into rather than out of their L1, there are attested cases of non-native speakers being employed as official interpreters and translators.

All except (1) are contingent issues. In that way the question: 'can a second language learner become a native speaker of a target language?' reduces to: is it necessary to acquire a code in early childhood in order to be a native speaker of that code? Now the answer to that question is to ask a further question, what is it that the child acquires in acquiring his/her L1 ? But I have already answered that question in my criteria (2)-(6) above, and so the question again becomes a contingent one.

Attempts at definition are therefore vitiated by the unhelpful reductionism of the analytic statement which equates native speakers to one characteristic: childhood acquisition. The consequent lack of contingency appears to invalidate all empirical investigation.

There is also the cultural dimension we probably need to consider (Nos 2 and 3 above) since the first language child acquirer does have access to the resources of the culture attached to the language and particularly to those learnt and encoded or even imprinted early. But to what extent are such differences critical? What of subcultural differences between for example the Scots and the English; of different cultures with the same standard language (for example the Swiss, the Austrians, the former two Germanies); or of different cultures with different standard languages (for example the British and the Australian)? What too of International English and of an

isolated L1 in a multilingual setting (for example Indian English)? Given such interlingual differences and the lack of agreement on norms that certainly occurs among such groups it does appear that the second language learner has a difficult but not an impossible task to become a native speaker of a target language.

6.   The SLA approach: Coppieters and Birdsong

Such a conclusion may be more sociological than linguistic or psychological. For in addition to the tension referred to above between the ideal and the flesh and blood approaches to the native speaker, there is a further opposition between the sociological and the psychological views; they are not easily reconcilable. Coppieters (1987) nicely points up the lack of fit in his account of a grammatical judgement experiment. He took a group of 27 non-native adult speakers of French who had 'so thoroughly mastered French that it was no longer clearly possible to distinguish them from native speakers by mistakes which they made, or by the restricted nature of their choice of words and constructions.' (1987: 544). For baseline data he took 20 native speakers of French, matched with the experimental group as far as possible. He used 107 sentences illustrating various aspects of French and asked his subjects individually for acceptability judgements. His results indicated that the two groups belonged to two different populations, with no overlap between, even at extremes. Yet in spite of the clear divide he finds between native and non-native speakers, he accepts that there is an argument in favour of identity theory (Tajfel 1981): '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 formal underlying linguistic system'.

Nevertheless, for Coppieters, such an argument is strongly sociological and in his view competence must include a psychological dimension. He continues: 'it is also clear that the variation between native speakers and non-native speakers cannot simply be subsumed as a special case of the variation among native speakers: that is non-native speakers have been found to lie outside the the boundaries on native speaker variation' (1987: 545). Native speakers, reports Coppieters, 'did not need the help of an explicit context. No matter how skilful non-native speakers might be at deriving the appropriate interpretation of a sentence in context, their inability to do so in the absence of an explicit context indicates

a fundamental difference between their knowledge of the language and that of native speakers' (1987: 566–567)

Given the idiolectal and dialectal differences among native speakers themselves, Coppieters' claim is a strong one: his argument for cognitive rather than formal dissonance between native and non-native speakers concerns the grammar of the standard or common language learned before the critical period (Lennerberg 1967). Even so, this claim has been challenged.

Birdsong (1992) takes issue with researchers such as Long (1990) who appear to make an absolute distinction between the native speaker and the non-native speaker, viz that 'ultimate attainment' for the non-native speaker can never be equal to native speaker competence. Birdsong reexamines the Coppieters (1987) experiment with learners of French and reports also on his own parallel study. What he concludes is that while as a group his French language learners and the French native speaker subjects differed significantly, the large amount of overlap suggests that 'this general lack of difference is taken as evidence that ultimate attainment by nonnatives can coincide with that of natives' (1992: 739). Of course those who overlap are, as Birdsong admits, 'exceptional learners'; but the implication here is that 'our attention should turn to the issue of trainability: what can be discovered from exceptional learners that could be applied to improve other learners' chances of attaining native norms.' (1992: 742).

The fact of the success of these exceptional learners suggests that the native speaker is as much a sociolinguistic construct as a developmental one.

7.   The sociolinguistic approach

Coppieters represents the strong psychological position. According to that the native speaker is defined by early acquired knowledge. Bartsch (1988) takes a more sociological view, allowing for the importance of attitude and identity. Although both views concern control of the standard language, they are probably not reconcilable. But why should they be? The concept 'native speaker' is used entirely appropriately in these quite different ways. It is probable that what is most enduring about the concept has nothing to do with truth and reality, whether or not individuals are native speakers;

what matters most is the enduring native speaker myth combining both knowledge and identity: in that myth the two views have an equal role.

Bartsch (1988) states that 'norms are the social reality of the correctness notions... In this way correctness concepts which are psychic entities have a social reality' (Bartsch 1988:4). The correctness notions are the 'how to behave notions', similar to all other forms of learnt behaviour: how to ski, drive, play an instrument, dress and so on. What distinguishes language from these other skilled behaviours is that in addition to the pyschic entities (knowing whether or not you are doing it well, right and so on) there is the social reality which carries and provides sanctions.

The rules which are attributed to language by linguists, those which are constructed for the grammar of what Jespersen callled the common language, are therefore in part an acknowledgement and a working out of the intricate normative system acquired in taking on a standard language.

And it is important to remember that for Bartsch (and for us) correctness is not restricted to a few shibboleths such as in English: it's I/me; who/whom; will/shall) however frequently they may occur in teaching programmes, in primers and as examples of the supposed uselessness of the whole notion of correctness put forward by libertarian descriptivists. Correctness for Bartsch includes: the basic means of expression, lexical items, syntactic form, texts, semantic expression, pragmatic correctness. There is no argument here for triviality and no want of indication of the importance for language acquisition of correctness.

Norms are established in terms of central models in speaking and writing ; and those models may be individuals or more likely elite groups.

Bloomfield (1927) writes: 'the Menonimi will say that one person speaks well and another badly, that such-and-such a form of speech is incorrect and sounds bad, and another too much like a shaman's preaching or archaic ('the way the old, old people talked')

Bloomfield notes that though a foreigner he was able to share in these judgements of the Menonimi.

> *The nearest approach to an explanation of 'good' and 'bad'*
> *language seems to be this, then, that by a cumulation of*
> *obvious superiorities, both of character and standing, as well*
> *as of language, some persons are felt to be better models of*
> *conduct and speech than others.*   .(Bloomfield 1927).

Standard languages, like religions, provide a commonality but not a homogeneity. That is why it makes sense to speak of norms rather than of rules which the standard language member accepts.

8.   Empirical Studies

8.1   Grammatical Judgements

Ross (1979) in his paper 'Where's English?' discusses grammaticality judgements. He dismisses the strong hypothesis:

> English consists of that set of sentences which all speakers agree is grammatical,

in favour of the much weaker:

> there is a core of English sentences but this is very small.
> Beyond the core, there is no single continuum of acceptability.
> (Ross 1979: 129, 131).

Ross (1979) reports an empirical study of grammaticality judgements of 13 English sentences, selected so as to offer a range of sentence types on what he regards as the continuum of grammaticality. Ross's results, based on the 12 sentences in the Appendix (he discarded one of the original 13), may be summed up thus:

> *the sentences of a language seem to be viewed by speakers as*
> *falling into three groups, a Core (Sentences 1, 10), a Bog, and a*
> *Fringe (Sentences 12, 5).*   (Ross 1979: 156)

He finds general (though even here not universal) agreement about the grammaticality of his Core sentences; there is some variability in consensus that the Fringe sentences are not grammatical, and then comes the greatest variability in agreement about the Bog sentences (all the rest).

He continues

> *There are fairly clear differences between linguists and normals (the latter view themselves as more conservative than the former, and ...reject more sentences, and with greater confidence than the former do). There are also differences between native and foreign speakers, with the latter tending to reject more sentences than the former do, and also tending to make fuller use of all four grades than the former do.*
>
> (ibid: 156)

Ross invited his subjects (N = 30) to rate the sentences on the 4-point scale as follows:

> *1. The sentence sounds perfect. You would use it without hesitation.*

> *2. The sentence is less than perfect-something in it just doesn't feel comfortable. Maybe lots of people could say it, but you never feel quite comfortable with it.*

> *3. Worse than (2), but not completely impossible. Maybe somebody might use the sentence, but certainly not you. The sentence is almost beyond hope.*

> *4. The sentence is absolutely out. Impossible to understand, nobody would say it. Un-English.*   (Ross 1979: 161)

I replicated Ross's study (using a slightly localised version of his questionnaire) on a sample of applied linguists, all of whom had had experience as English language teachers. The sample (N = 34) was made up of staff (faculty) members, research students and Master's course-work students, containing both native speakers (NS, N=16) and non native speakers (NNS, N=18) of English. The non-native speakers of English were in all cases fluent, highly proficient English speakers. The NS in the sample were mostly speakers of British English)

My results were similar to Ross's on his test. I report here only one feature, the Native Speaker (NS)-Non-native speaker (NNS) difference in terms of the overall sentence acceptance and rejection rate. Here are the results for NS/NNS selection of the four

categories for all 12 sentences, ranging from Category 1 ('the sentence sounds perfect') to Category 4 ('the sentence is absolutely out... Un-English')

NNS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Mean
Siswati	1	4	2	2	4	3	3	1	4	1	1	4	2.5
Greek	1	3	1	1	4	3	3	2	2	1	2	3	2.2
Hungar	1	3	1	1	4	4	4	2	2	1	3	3	2.4
German	1	2	1	3	4	3	3	4	2	1	1	4	2.3
Japanese	1	4	1	2	4	2	4	4	1	1	1	3	2.4
Hungarian	1	3	1	2	4	3	3	4	2	1	1	4	2.4
Urdu	1	2	2	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	3	1.6
Japanese	1	3	2	1	3	4	3	3	3	1	2	3	2.4
Korean	1	4	2	1	4	1	3	3	3	1	1	2	2.2
Dutch	2	2	2	1	3	2	4	2	3	1	1	4	2.2
Japanese	1	3	2	2	4	1	4	2	3	1	2	3	2.3
Hebrew	2	4	4	3	4	2	3	1	4	1	2	4	2.8
Chinese	1	3	2	1	2	2	3	3	4	1	2	4	2.3
Chinese	1	4	2	2	4	1	2	3	4	1	1	3	2.3
Kirundi	1	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	1	1	1	4	1.5
Spanish	1	3	2	1	4	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	1.7
Japanese	1	3	1	2	4	3	3	4	2	1	2	3	2.4
Sinhala	1	3	3	2	4	3	4	1	2	1	1	4	2.4
Mean	1.1	3.0	1.8	1.6	3.5	2.5	3.0	2.2	2.5	1.0	1.5	3.3	

Sentences

Table 1: Choices of Grammaticality Sentences by NNS

						Sentences							
NS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Mean
ENS 1	1	4	1	2	3	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	1.8
ENS 2	1	2	1	2	3	2	4	1	1	1	2	4	2.0
ENS 3	1	3	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	1.4
ENS 4	2	3	3	2	2	2	4	1	3	1	2	2	2.2
ENS 5	1	3	2	1	3	1	4	1	3	1	1	3	2.0
ENS 6	1	3	4	2	3	1	4	2	3	1	2	4	2.5
ENS 7	1	3	1	2	2	1	3	1	1	1	2	1	1.6
ENS 8	1	2	3	3	1	1	4	1	1	1	3	4	2.1
ENS 9	1	2	1	1	4	4	2	1	4	1	1	4	2.2
ENS 10	1	3	1	2	4	2	3	1	2	1	1	3	2.0
ENS 11	1	2	1	2	4	2	3	1	2	1	1	3	2.3
ENS 12	1	3	2	2	2	1	3	1	3	1	1	4	2.0
ENS 13	1	1	1	1	3	1	4	1	2	1	2	4	1.8
ENS 14	1	4	2	2	4	2	3	2	4	1	2	2	2.4
ENS 15	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	1	2	1	2	2	1.7
ENS 16	1	2	1	1	3	2	4	2	2	1	1	3	1.9
Mean	1.1	2.7	1.6	1.7	2.7	1.7	3.3	1.2	2.3	1.0	1.7	3.0	

Table 2: Choices of Grammaticality Sentences by NS

	Sentence Mean	Sentence SD
NS	1.99	0.78
NNS	2.23	0.85

Table 3: Means and SDs for NS and NNS on Grammaticality Sentences

8.2   Results

8.2.1. The two groups are significantly different at the 1% level (t [for independent samples]=18.5, df=32). As the Total Sentence Mean and SD for the two groups indicate (Table 3), the NS range is narrower than the NNS range (Mean = 1.99: 2.23; SD = 0.78: 0.85). Not that this means that the NS are more conservative. Indeed, on the contrary, they are more adventurous, or perhaps we should say they are more tolerant of uncertainty with regard to

grammaticality. If they were more conservative than the NNS, their ratings for sentences would focus narrowly in the middle range, with predominant choices of the 2s and 3s (between the perfect 1s and the absolutely out 4s). But in fact what they do (relative to the NNS) is to cluster their choices on the 1s and 2s, giving the benefit of the doubt to doubtful sentences. The NNS on the other hand choose 3s and 4s more frequently. It is they, as a group, who are more conservative, or perhaps here we should say, less aware of possibilities, less wide-ranging in their knowledge of potential contexts of use, more concerned with the risk of being wrong.

The Mean choices for the 4 ratings for the two groups are given in Table 4:

	1	2	3	4
NS	4.9	3.6	1.9	1.5
NNS	4.3	2.7	2.6	2.3

Table 4: Mean ratings by NS and NNS on Grammaticality Sentences

8.2.2. At the same time, the two groups are similar. A product moment correlation between the two sets of sentence means gives an r of 0.88. In other words, in spite of the difference in mean amount (reported in 1 above), in terms of variance the two groups tend to order the sentences in the same way. A Sign Test (N=12; T=11 (one pair identical), L=3) indicated a ns result since the obtained value of L is greater than the highest required value of L (1) where T=11.[2] At the same time, since in 8 of the paired values NNS is higher, there does seem to be a suggestion that higher scores are likely to occur for NNS than for NS. But of course we knew this already from the differences reported between group means and SDs.

8.2.3. In terms of Ross's three categories of grammatical uncertainty (Core: Sentences 1,10; Fringe: Sentences 5,12; Bog: Sentences 2,3,4,6,7,8,9,11), the two groups agreed almost exactly on the grammaticality of the two Core sentences (Tables 1 & 2).

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[2]L = Frequency of the less frequent sign
 T = Frequency of both pluses and minuses.

On the two Fringe sentences, the NNS were less accepting than the NS (Tables 1 & 2).

But most disagreement was on certain Bog sentences, notably Sentence 8 (Mean difference of 0.91)

> *(8)   That is a frequently talked about proposal*

and Sentence 6 (Mean difference of 0.82).

> *(6)   I urge that anything he touch be burned*

In both cases the differences were in the expected direction.

These are extreme examples of the general case we have already referred to, that the NNS are less likely to accept as grammatical sentences about which they are uncertain. The NS on the other hand are either more knowledgeable or they are prepared to give such sentences the benefit of the doubt, and it is precisely in what Ross calls the Bog that this difference exhibits itself most acutely.

A crude summary of the NS/NNS group differences then might be that NNs have internalised the same grammatical judgements as NS but don't as a group know as much.

8.2.4. What about their performance as individuals? Does the NNS group contain any of Birdsong's 'exceptional learners'? In a non-linguistic sense they are all candidates for such ascription. They are all fluent adult speakers of English; all are teachers of English, all have studied English for at least 10 years. None of them started acquiring English as a young child.

In order to support my claim that in selected cases NNS individuals, on this evidence, are indistinguishable linguistically from NS, I present below ratings for the 12 sentences for three pairs of respondents having the same or similar total scores. The first pair contains 2 NS, the second and third pairs have one NS and one NNS. As will be seen, the choices by the pairs of NS/NNS are just as similar/dissimilar as those made by the pair of NS. Since it is the case that all of the NS produce a unique set of ratings and no two profiles are identical, it seems reasonable to argue that, in certain

cases, individual NNS cannot be distinguished from what is normal variation within a similar group of NS.

The 2 NS (both with a mean for sentence ratings of 2.0) agree with one another in 5 ratings (Table 5); they differ by one level in 6 cases and by two levels in one case.

Similarly, NS/NNS pair 1 (both with a mean for sentence ratings of 1.7) agree with one another in 5 ratings (Table 6); they differ by one level in 6 cases and by two levels in one case.

In the second NS/NNS pair while the overall means differ in the expected direction (2.3: 2.0) the two members of the pair agree with one another in 7 of the 12 cases and differ by only one level in the other five. (Table 7).

| ENS 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 2.0 |
| ENS 12 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2.0 |

Table 5 : Comparison of ratings by NS/NS pair

| Spanish | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1.7 |
| ENS 15 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1.7 |

Table 6: Comparison of ratings by NS/NNS pair 1

| German | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2.3 |
| ENS 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 2.0 |

Table 7: Comparison of ratings by NS/NNS pair 2

8.3   Discussion

The question to which I address myself is what it is that binds the NS together (and to a large extent these NNS, who are, after all, near NS) as speakers of what Jespersen called a common language, given that they show such idiolectal variability when presented with grammaticality judgements. And the solution I offer is indeed

the common language of Jespersen, or more relevantly perhaps, the Standard Language to which they (like the NNS) have been exposed through the Bartschian norms of education and training. If therefore native speakers become native speakers, at least in part, through education and training, NNS can also become native speakers of the target language if they too are exposed to similar education and training.

8.4   Pragmatic Competence

As a further check on the NNS potentiality to become 'exceptional learners', I replicated the Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) study of pragmatic competence in expressing gratitude in English. In their study Eisenstein and Bodman report an analysis of their questionnaire data relating to seven gratitude situations. Their analysis shows that native and non-native speakers of English varied in their responses. They emphasise the importance of those differences:

> *advanced non-native speakers of English had considerable difficulty adequately expressing gratitude in the target language. Some problems were pragmalinguistic in nature, exhibiting divergence from native use on lexical and syntactic levels. Learners were often unable to approximate native idioms and routines. In our judgement, socio-pragmatic limitations were more severe, because the socio-cultural incongruities they revealed created the potential for more serious misunderstandings.* (Eisenstein and Bodman 1986: 176)

In Table 2 of their article (ibid 1986:173; reproduced in the Appendix) they summarise the results for all non-native students. In spite of their general conclusion, quoted above, that the differences between native and non-native speakers were considerable, what this Table reveals is that their sample contained a substantial number of 'exceptional learners' who were not distinguishable in this highly sophisticated communicative competence area from native speakers. Their Table 2 provides columns for the following categories of response: No Response; Not Acceptable; Problematical; Acceptable; Perfect; Not Comprehensible; Resistant.

Summing across responses by non-native speakers gives a total mean for Perfect + Acceptable of 51%. If we exclude Acceptable ('clear and

appopriate language, but containing small errors which do not interfere seriously with native speakers' understanding') we still retain a total mean for Perfect of 31%. In other words of the 67 non-native speakers of American English in the USA,'in advanced-level ESL classes', 20 were producing native speaker responses. Eisenstein and Bodman stress the limitations of their data, pointing in particular to the lack of fit between the respondents' written responses to what were presented as situations requiring oral expressions of gratitude. But of course the same lack of fit existed for their native speaker subjects whom they used as a control.

In a partial replication (slightly localised to the UK context) of the Eisenstein and Bodman investigation (N = 32; 16 native speakers of English; 16 non-native speakers of English) I collected responses to three of their gratitude situations (the $5 loan, the dinner invitation; the sweater gift: see Appendix). These were all analysed in three categories, from 'Bald' to 'Bald plus Expansion' to 'Elaborate' expressions of gratitude. Thus, an example of a Bald response to the offer of the loan would be:

'Thanks a lot!'

of a Bald + Expansion:

'Thanks very much. I really appreciate this.'

and of an Elaborate response (in this case with a promise and/or a comment):

'Are you sure this is OK? Thanks very much. I'll give it back on Monday, definitely.'

Across all three situations the differences between native and non-native speakers were minimal: non-native speakers had slightly more Bald + Expansion and slightly fewer Elaborate responses (Bald+Expansion : native speakers = 16; non-natives = 17; Elaborate: native speakers = 29; non-natives = 26).

		NNS	NS
Loan	Bald	5	2
	Bald+Expansion	3	4
	Elaborate	8	10
Sweater	Bald	0	0
	Bald+Expansion	7	6
	Elaborate	9	10
Dinner	Bald	0	1
	Bald+Expansion	7	6
	Elaborate	9	9
Totals	Bald	5=10%	3=6%
	Bald+Expansion	17=35%	16=33%
	Elaborate	26=54%	29=60%

Table 8: NS/NNS gratitude expressions in three categories

8.5   Discussion

In terms of Eisenstein and Bodman's 'Perfect' category, across all three of my situations, 56% of non-native speaker responses could be regarded as 'perfect'. No doubt what counts as 'perfect' is a matter of interpretation, and the figure of 56% refers to responses rather than to individual non-native speakers. Even so, a check of individual total responses indicates that at least three of these non-native speakers had completely 'perfect' responses. It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that several of these non-native speakers of English were pragmatically 'exceptional learners'.

9.   Further Research: Operationalising language test data to describe the NS

Morton's fork[3], offered two equally unpalatable choices. Is that where we are with the native speaker? If the native speaker still seems problematic as a goal, is that, as I have suggested, because we remain doubtful whether learners can ever reach that goal, or is it because we are no clearer about how to define the native speaker?

Can we avoid both choices by instead using second language test data to help describe the native speaker? After all, the measurement question will not go away, since we still need to demonstrate how it is we describe the attainment of these exceptional learners.

There are several ways of demonstrating this. The first is to take examples of performances on tests by the kinds of second language learners who find careers in international agency interpreting or of course spying. It does not have to be test data of course. It could equally well be examples of writings (writings rather than speeches because of the distraction of accent) by such well known learners as Nabokov, Senghor, Becket or Narayan. But such demonstration is perhaps supererogatory because we all know that learners can - in exceptional cases—reach such ultimate attainment. And if it is then countered that these are always limited tasks or domains, that there are other areas of native speaker control that are not within the demonstration, then the answer must be that this is true also of sub-groups of native speakers.

A second way of demonstrating is to use test descriptors to describe exceptional learners' attainment in order to examine to what extent they fail to reach ultimate attainment. For example, the descriptors on a test such as the Italian Teachers' Proficiency Test (see below) purport to describe what a second language learner is required to achieve, But what is intriguing about performance at the

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[3] John Morton, (1420–1500) was Archbishop of Canterbury and a minister of the English King Henry the Seventh. As a way of raising forced loans he would apply his 'fork'—the argument that if people were obviously rich, then they could afford to pay, and if people looked poor, then they were obviously holding something back and so could also afford to pay. An early form of Catch 22.

highest level (Level 3) on these scales is how difficult it is to distinguish what is expected of the learner from what is assumed of the native speaker (Elder 1994).

Certificate of Proficiency for Language Teachers: Italian

Description of Test Performance: Level 3:

> *In performing the range of test tasks the speaker demonstrated communicative abilities and strategies which were highly appropriate for the classroom context. The tone of voice, intonation, phrasing and pace of delivery and level of language used reflected a high degree of confidence and audience awareness. In explaining student error, the speaker was able to articulate the rules of Italian grammar and phonology in a clear and accurate manner with judicious use of specialist terminology.*

A third demonstration is to use test data to chart language separation, that is performance on a test (like writing in a code) which illustrates a late stage of acceptance within a speech community of a new standard. In other words what is needed are answers to an EFL test (eg TOEFL) which would not receive a high mark from an American or British etc judge but would do so from a compatriot. Such evidence would support the claims of New English writers that the standard they are modelling is now localised.

Exceptional learners are needed for all three demonstrations: in the first and second cases (joining the target standard) they indicate individual ability. In the third case (here we would call them prestige speakers) they show how individuals can influence the direction of a social group. Lowenberg (1995) argues that 'diversification on a societal level is clearly a significant variable that can no longer be ignored in the measurement of English proficiency.' (Lowenberg: 1995: 64). Interesting as such an argument is, it seems to me quite unlikely that any international language proficiency test would build in local variation in this way. What is more likely is the development of localised proficiency tests.

The fourth type of demonstration is to establish an acceptable local foreign language level of attainment as the norm. This issue has been considered in relation to a teacher proficiency test for

Indonesian teachers of English (Brown and Lumley 1995: 122–128, and Hill, this volume). What this test sets out to do is:

* to assess English language proficiency as relevant to teachers

* to base its content on topics and situations relevant, familiar and hence accessible to people in Indonesia

* to emphasise assessment of the ability of inhabitants of the region to communicate effectively in English with each other, rather than relating their proficiency to metropolitan norms.

* to rely entirely on local Indonesian teacher trainers as raters.

The top level of performance on this test could, in essence, represent, in a reportable way, an approximation to native speaker proficiency.

10.   Conclusion

A standard language needs as its 'members' those who uphold its norms by taking on the responsibility of being its native speakers. Native speakers represent standard languages: it is the standard language they are native speakers of. What exceptional learners tell us is (1) that native speaker attainment is achievable in the target standard language and (2) that an alternative standard is possible when such learners are accorded the status of prestige speakers of the alternative standard. As we saw with both the Ross replication and the Eisenstein & Bodman replication, in certain cases, both in grammaticality judgements and in pragmatic selections, individual NNS are indistinguishable from NS; these are exceptional learners.

The native speaker is a fine myth: we need it as a model, a goal, almost an inspiration. But it is useless as a measure; it will not help us define our goals. So, in spite of my firm agreement with Birdsong and my conviction that there is a continuum between native speakers and non-native speakers, nevertheless, I recognise that for language teaching purposes what is crucial is the description of adequate partial proficiencies. It is to language tests that we look for these partial proficiency descriptions, but that is the subject of another paper. This is what the second language learner can tell us about the

native speaker which the native speaker's lack of boundaries cannot.

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Appendix

J.R. Ross Grammaticality Sentences

(Ross J. R. (1979). Where's English? In Fillmore, C.J., Kempler, D. and Wang, W. S-Y (Eds.). *Individual Differences in Language Ability and Language Behavior.* (pp. 127–163). Academic Press:New York).

1.   Under no circumstances would I accept that offer

2.   Nobody who I get along with is here who I want to talk to

3.   We don't believe the claim that Jimson ever had any money

4.   The fact he wasn't in the store shouldn't be forgotten

5.   What will the grandfather clock stand between the bed and?

6.   I urge that anything he touch be burned

7.   All the further we got was to Sudbury

8.   That is a frequently talked·about proposal

9.   Nobody is here who I get along with who I want to talk to

10.   The doctor is sure that there will be no problems

11.   The idea he wasn't in the store is preposterous

12.   Such formulas should be writable down

(NB Sentences (11) and (12) in this list were (12) and (13) in Ross's. I omitted Ross's Sentence (11) in my study for the reason Ross himself gives:

> *I have omitted from discussion the results of the eleventh questionnaire sentence, where some additional questions of a semantic kind, were asked, because the variation among the respondents was so overwhelming as to defy analysis.*
> (Ross 1979: 134, fn2))

Eisenstein and Bodman's Gratitude Situations

(original numbering: the three used in my study are asterisked)

*1.   It's Friday. You look in your wallet and notice that you only
       have $2.00. Your good friend at work notices this and hears
       you say "Darn, I'll have to go to the bank." Your friend asks if
       you need money, and you say that you forgot to go to the bank.
       Your friend says: "I have plenty. How much do you need?" You
       say: "Could you lend me $5.00? I'll pay you back on Monday."
       Your friend says "Sure. Are you sure you don't need more than
       that?" You say you don't. Your friend gives you the $5.00.

*3.   It's your birthday and you are having a few people over for
       dinner. A friend brings you a present. You unwrap it and find a
       blue sweater.

4.   You work for a large company. The Vice-President of
       Personnel calls you into his office. He tells you to sit down,
       · You feel a little nervous, because you have only been working
       there for 6 months. The Vice-President says "You're doing a
       good job. In fact, we are so pleased with you that I am going to
       give you a $20.00 a week raise.

7.   You find yourself in sudden need of money - $500.00. You
       mention this to a friend. Your friend immediately offers to
       lend it to you. You are surprised and very grateful. Your friend
       writes out a check for $500.00 and gives it to you. At first you
       say: "Oh, no, I didn't mean for you to lend it to me. I couldn't
       take it." Your friend says: "Really, it's all right. What are
       friends for?" After your friend insists again, you take the
       check.

9.   Your friend suggests going out to lunch. You say that you'd like
       to go, but you only have $2.00. Your friend says,"Ah, don't
       worry. I'll take you today." Your friend takes you to a very
       nice restaurant-a much more expensive one than the ones you
       usually go to. You have a wonderful meal. Your friend pays
       and you get up to leave.

10.You have just gotten a new and better job. A friend at the office
       tells you she has organized a farewell party for you.

*14.You have been invited to the home of a rather new friend. You have dinner with him and his wife and a few other friends of theirs. The food was great, and you really enjoyed the evening. As you leave, your hosts accompany you to the door.

Eisenstein, M. & Bodman, J. (1986: 173: Table 2).

Summary of results of all students on individual questions

Q.	Q. topic	No Resp	Not accept	Prob	Accept	Perf	NC	Resist
1	$5.00	5 7.5%	3 4.5%	9 13.4%	9 13.4%	39 58.2%	1 1.5%	1 1.5%
3	Sweat	2 3.0%	3 4.5%	19 28.4%	14 20.9%	29 43.3%	0 0%	0 0%
4	Raise	5 7.5%	10 14.9%	16 23.9%	14 20.9%	18 26.9%	1 1.5%	3 4.5%
7	$500	9 13.4%	3 4.5%	14 20.9%	15 22.4%	21 31.3%	1 1.5%	4 6.0%
9	Lunch	5 3.0%	11 16.4%	22 32.8%	9 13.4%	14 20.9%	1 1.5%	5 7.5%
10	Fare-well	14 20.9%	7 10.4%	21 31.3%	11 16.45	13 19.45	0 0%	0 0%
14	Dinner	7 10.4%	2 3.0%	34 35.8%	23 34.3%	11 16.4%	0 0%	0 0%