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Mother Tongues and Nations: The Invention of the Native Speaker

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The Invention of the Native Speaker

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by

Thomas Paul Bonfiglio

De Gruyter Mouton

Introduction

On Thursday, July 12, 1990, the Singapore newspaper *The Straits Times* listed the following advertisement: "Established private school urgently requires native speaking expatriate English teachers for foreign students." By Saturday, July 14, the advertisement had been changed as such: "Established private school urgently requires native speaking *Caucasian* English teachers for foreign students" (Kandiah 1998: 79). It does not require great powers of speculation to imagine the events and discussions at *The Straits Times* on that Friday the Thirteenth, an inauspicious day for the Anglophone applicants whose appearance did not conform to a certain stereotype. Clearly, this example belies the ostensible innocence and neutrality of the locution "native speaker," which is invariably taken to indicate an objective description of someone possessing natural authority in language. The belated addition of the word "Caucasian," however, indicates that the semantic field of the term "native" in the original advertisement extends well beyond purely linguistic criteria; it clearly contains notions of race and ethnicity.

While ethnic prejudices can be expressed in and through language, they are not, however, intrinsically linguistic in nature. They are, instead, supra-linguistic concepts that become disguised as linguistic ones and imported into the theater of language. The pathways that facilitate this importation have been made by the repeated interconnections between the concept of language and the concept of race. In other words, language in the service of racism and ethnocentrism cannot occur without conceptualizing language and race in similar ways. Accordingly, the identification of language with race is not possible without the genetic misprisions that create the myth of race in the first place; thus a folkloric notion of genetic ownership of language lies at the root of all ethnocentric linguistic prejudice: "our native" language, which is "our birthright," is seen as endangered by the presence of an other who is perceived as a biological contaminant and thus a threat to the matrix of nation, ethnicity, and language. Such ethnolinguistic prejudice continually lurks behind the apparently innocent kinship metaphors employed to describe the authority of the speaker who acquired the language in question as his or her first language. These are metaphors of nativity and maternity found in the locutions "native speaker," "mother tongue," "native language," *langue maternelle*, *locuteur natif*, *Muttersprache*, *Muttersprachler*, *lingua materna*, *modersprake*, and so on.

The contemporary images of the native speaker have been well analyzed, and the automatic attribution of authority to the native speaker based on the fact that he or she was born into the specific matrix of culture and language has been well deconstructed, as will be shown in the synopsis below. While scholarship has done well to illuminate the gestures of power and hegemony in the image of the native speaker, it has yet to account for the genesis of the descriptors employed. The most salient lacuna in this research, however, is the fact that the problem in itself has never been historicized.

The article "Mother tongue: the theoretical and sociopolitical construction of a concept," by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, can serve as an example. The authors offer a nuanced study of the dynamics of privileging and deprivileging in the employment of the term "mother tongue" and make an excellent observation: "There are more multilinguals than monolinguals in the world. Monolingual people are thus a minority in the world, but many of them belong to a very powerful minority, namely the minority which has been able to function in all situations through the medium of their mother tongue, and who therefore have never been forced to learn another language" (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1989: 468). The present study investigates the damaging metaphorical resonances of the terms "mother tongue" and "native speaker" in the hands of the "very powerful minority" that the authors describe. The authors introduced, in 1986, the term *linguicism*, cloned from the term *racism*, to indicate the application of divisive and undemocratic ideologies based on language. The problem is that, while they illuminate the discriminatory function of the terms "mother tongue" and "native speaker," they neither historicize nor deconstruct the designations themselves. One could substitute "first-language speaker" for these terms and not alter the results of the authors' arguments, however astute they may be.

A similar problem can be found in the study of racism in language in general, which has largely been limited to descriptions and classifications of the permutations thereof, along with ample theoretical critiques. *The Language, Ethnicity, and Race Reader* (2003), a useful but motley anthology, is a case in point. The historical and ideological etiology of the conflation of race and language has, however, only recently begun to be addressed (Bonfiglio 2007). This is indeed an impediment to research, as prejudicial misconceptions cannot be properly demystified without an understanding of their origins and radical causes. Thus this inquiry will illuminate the *sine qua non* of ethnolinguistic prejudice, the determining factors without which that prejudice would be nonexistent, and focus on the historical development and exemplary permutations thereof.

The attempts to historicize the notion of linguistic nativity have been few and tangential. Victor Yngve, in the article “The struggle for a theory of native speaker” (1981), places the blame for the absence of research on the native speaker on the ancient Greeks, whose discourse of language was far too abstract to treat of individual permutations. He then vaults directly to the nineteenth century, and, in doing so, omits the entire emergence and development of the idea of a native language. Similarly, Ashcroft, in the article “Language and race” (2001), locates the beginning of the link between language and race in the discovery of Indo-European, and Probal Dasgupta, in “The native speaker: a short history” (1998), places the origin in the eighteenth century:

The cities of the Enlightenment gave rise to the anti-urbanist impulse ... one of the many strands of Romantic work was to go to the countryside and look for authentic folk culture and language ... the fieldwork of the Grimm brothers typifies this programme; they were collecting folklore ... as dialect data to arrive at a comparative grammar ... but the content of the programme goes back to Goethe and Rousseau; their sense of the poetic and human pre-rational dimension ... For language, this meant that the knowledge completeness of a *grammaire générale et raisonnée* gave way to an emphasis on the vast ocean of the pre-rational and diverse concreteness of natural languages. (Dasgupta 1998: 185)

It will be shown, however, that this phenomenon arose much earlier.

Thus this work explores the history of the submerged racial, ethnic, and gender ideologies present in the concept of the mother tongue and the native speaker, especially vis-à-vis the perceived authority of that speaker, and investigates the origin of the inductive leaps, the steps that are suppressed from awareness, that operate when one is advised to consult a native speaker, or when one claims to be in possession of an authoritative answer by virtue of native speaker status. It must be emphasized from the outset, however, that this inquiry will limit its scope to the emergence of these phenomena within the European tradition. It will focus predominately on western Europe and will make no claims to a universalist critique.

Aspects of this problem can be illustrated by a brief reference to the notions of authority in language in the Germanophone countries. In Germany itself, the speakers who have appropriated authority—those of the industrial cities of the north—are often unaware of 1) the nonstandard elements in their own speech patterns, 2) the nonstandard nature of the Americanisms that they frequently employ, 3) the fact that the standard language is a written construct, and 4) the fact that written competence does not corre-

late with geographical location. Consequently, they often engage in circular reasoning (“I am from the north, where High German is spoken, therefore whatever I say is correct, because I am from the north.”) and perform a wholesale disenfranchisement of southern German speakers. When traveling to southern Germany, Austria, or Switzerland, some will actually “correct” the speech patterns of those regional speakers. While doing so, they regularly employ Americanisms that have been appropriated into their language since the end of WWII. The usage of Americanisms in German can violate scholarly standards much more than do the cultivated speech patterns of educated Bavarians, Austrians, or Swiss, who easily code switch out of dialect into the standard form. Indeed, in German linguistic circles, one speaks of *Neuenglodeutsch*, literally ‘New Anglo-German,’ in reference to the current highly Americanized northern German vernacular.

In the study “*Neuenglodeutsch. Über die Pidginisierung der Sprache*,” Dieter Zimmer demonstrated, already in 1997, the liberal facility with which the German language assimilates English words, generating such surprising pidgin forms as *fighten*, *multitasken*, *phonen*, *powern*, and a host of others (Zimmer 1997: 61). The term *Neuenglodeutsch* is a pun on the historical designation *Neuhochdeutsch*, or New High German, which is used to refer to the early modern written forms that emerged during the reformation and were coeval with the invention of the printing press. Some evidence on this topic, however anecdotal, seems to indicate that this behavior by northern Germans does not seem to have been prominent before WWII, when the Low German dialects of the north, which are currently highly marginalized, were still actively spoken. At that time, the linguistic insecurity of code switching from dialect into standard occurred in all regions. It seems that one is confronted here with a postwar problematic matrix of national, linguistic, and cultural identity. After WWII, Germany could not look backward to tradition and had to reinvent itself within the international political economy of the Anglophone *pax americana*. Language then became a surrogate theater for the struggle to establish ownership of the new German identity. Germany offers a useful example here, in that the notion of the authority of the native speaker is not only ideologically constructed: it also stratifies speakers into the more native and the less native and valorizes those “real” natives in ownership of the power discourse.

Chapter 1 of this study reviews the recent literature on the figure of the native speaker, especially the studies that demonstrate the acquisition of first language (L1) level performance by second language (L2) speakers. The perception of a “native accent” is also discussed. Chapter 2 discusses the status of Attic Greek and Roman Latin in antiquity, the hegemony of

Latin in the Roman Empire, and the suppression of vernacular alternatives. It shows that metaphors of maternity and nativity in the discourse of language were absent in antiquity, and that ethnolinguistic prejudice and the locutions that convey its ideologies, e.g. “mother tongue,” “native language,” and “native speaker” (and their European permutations) arose in the early modern period along with the emergence of the nation states.

Chapter 3 accounts for the absence of metaphors of nativity and maternity in the discourse of language in ancient Greece and Rome. It examines the semantic fields of the Greek and Roman locutions for the language of empire: the Greek *γλῶσσα Ἀττικὴ* (*glōssa Attikē*) and the Roman *sermo patrius* and shows the absence of notions of linguistic ethnicity in those concepts. It examines the research on bilingualism in the Roman Empire and the fluidity of (linguistic) identity. It also shows that the abstract discourse of language did not treat of specific permutations. Chapter 4 traces the emergence of the locutions “mother tongue” and “native language” from the discourse of the European vernaculars of the late middle ages. It also locates the emergence of arboreal metaphors for language. It argues that the justification of the vernacular necessitated the invention of corporeal and arboreal metaphors, and that organicism itself has its origin in the nationalist gestures of the derivation of national identity from local organic nature. The chapter also illuminates the struggle to justify the vernacular as a fourth sacred language.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how the discourse of language in the European eighteenth century reinforces ethnolinguistic nationalist prejudices, all the while becoming more and more abstract, and argues that the further arborification of language aids in the enracination of the vernacular. Chapter 6 continues the thread of the abstraction of the discourse of ethnolinguistic nationalism by illustrating its generalization to language “families” in the Indo-European hypothesis, which is shown to be a further abstraction of the arboreal model that serves to strengthen the genealogical configuration of language in general. The quest for the mother tongue—here the “Aryan” language—becomes couched in the secular discourse of nineteenth century biology. The chapter also analyzes the progressive biologization of language. Chapter 7 examines the issue of infant-directed speech, also known as “motherese,” in the context of the continuation of the protectionist ideology of the mother tongue. It discusses the confusion between *langue* and *langage* in the issue of whether or not there exists a definable human language instinct. Using recent research on cladistics and linguistics, the chapter also shows the insufficiency of the arboreal model for language and the appropriateness of reticulate or wave models. It argues that the arboreal

model is surreptitiously preferred because it reinforces genetic notions of language.

In 2003, Bauman and Briggs published *Voices of Modernity*, in which the authors use the categories of purification and hybridization as organizational principles for viewing European language ideologies and the politics of inequality since the seventeenth century. In that work, the authors succeed in showing the antidemocratic strategies both in the attempt to idealize language free of context, as well as in the attempt to fuse language with extralinguistic themes, such as race and class. The present study is largely concerned with hybrid models of language, but it also illuminates the smuggling of ideology even in the purifying attempts to model linguistics on the natural sciences of the nineteenth century. Bauman and Briggs exhort scholarship to continue “examining assumptions about language ... and tradition” and “assessing and challenging modernist projects;” they also encourage scholarship to “never let constructions of language and tradition masquerade as cartographies of the real” (Bauman and Briggs 2003: 316–317). The present inquiry proceeds in the spirit of their project and employs the term *ethnolinguistic nationalism* to designate the confluence of folkloric notions of ethnicity, nativity, maternity, and exclusive ownership in the discourse of the national language.

Ethnolinguistic nationalism emerged with the birth of the modern nation state and continues to date. Some of its manifestations have been modified by the ideologies of subsequent epochs, others have remained constant. While this study progresses in a generally historical manner, it often invokes symptomatic expressions from one chronological period to illustrate similar manifestations in another. These cross-temporal comparisons should be seen as helpful optical devices and not as indications of anachronistic transgression. Moreover, it should also be emphasized that it is indeed difficult to arrange the discourse of ethnolinguistic nationalism into a coherent narrative, as this discourse is architected, in large part, by cognitive dissonance, catachreses, inductive leaps, and fundamentally non-rational defense mechanisms. Its manifestations range from the amusing to the absurd, from the aesthetic to the abhorrent, from the plausible to the preposterous, all, however, intriguing in their historical and cultural significance. As the discourse itself emerges slowly, and as its complexity accumulates chronologically, a historical narrative is perhaps the best framework for the analysis of its representations.

This study will progressively illuminate the emergence and development of a nuclear metaphor for the ideologies of maternity and nativity in the nationalist configuration of language, that of the *nursery*. This metaphor is

a condensation of several images at once: infant nursing, the care of children, and the cultivation of plants. In Europe, the configuration of the national language as incubating in a nursery in this multivalent context begins in the late middle ages and persists until the current era. From this nodal point emerges a network of associations that access numerous nationalist and protectionist ideologies.

This analysis cannot, at this juncture, provide an abstract and ahistorical account of the emergence of the ethnolinguistic ideology of mother tongue and native speaker. The fact that this ideology emerges from the late medieval confluence of religion, culture, and politics necessitates that the theoretical discussion be contextualized within this crucial historical intersection. Moreover, the emergence of this ideology cannot be properly treated without first accounting for its absence in antiquity. As a theoretical discussion a priori would be awkward and perplexing, the reader will find the hypotheses for the genesis of this ideology most fully engaged in Chapter 4.