Standards and the native speaker:
Sociolinguistic and assessment interfaces, moral prescriptivism, and the role of professional associations

Dr Talia Isaacs

UCL Centre for Applied Linguistics

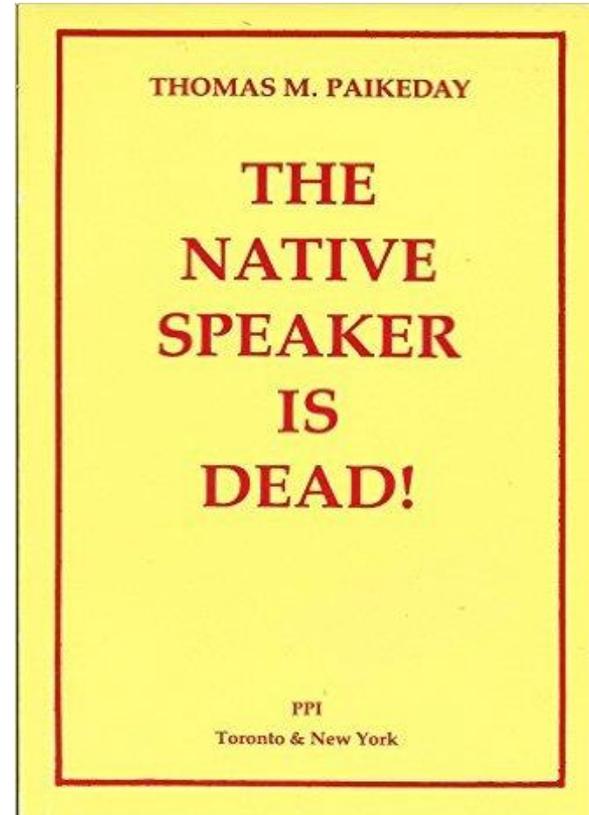IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education & Society

University College London, UK

EALTA Webinar, 2022

Nietzsche: "God is dead" („Gott ist tot")

Also
sprach Zarathustra.

Ein Buch
für
Alle und Keinen.

Friedrich Nietzsche.

Chemnitz 1883.
Verlag von Ernst Schmeitzner.

1883

THOMAS M. PAIKEDAY

THE
NATIVE
SPEAKER
IS
DEAD!

PPI
Toronto & New York

Paikeday, 1985

"God is no longer a credible source of absolute moral principles" (Morius Frances, 2015)

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Invited Research Issues | 🔒 Open Access | (cc) (i)

Redressing the Balance in the Native Speaker Debate: Assessment Standards, Standard Language, and Exposing Double Standards

Talia Isaacs ✉, Heath Rose,

Download article (free)**:**
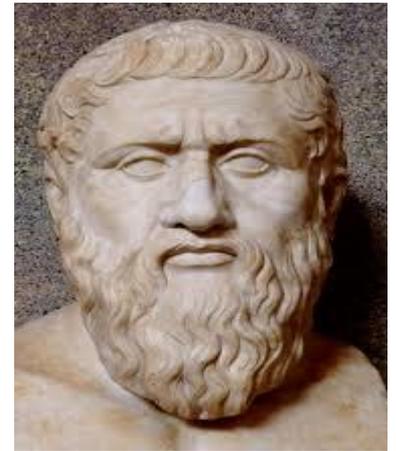https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/tesq.3041

▸ Standards
- Assessment standards
- Standard language
- Double standards & exposing hypocrisy

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What is an appropriate *standard*?

▸ Definition (Oxford English Dictionary)
- "A required or agreed level of quality or attainment"
- "Something used as a measure, norm, or model in comparative evaluations"

▸ Standards pervade human societies; represent a utopian vision (Fulcher, 2016)
- Plato's *The Republic*

Standards → Plato (≈380 BC)

▸ Gold, silver, and brass & iron classes of people

▸ Guardians of the state (rulers, soldiers) need to be tested to prevent state decline

- Topics: pleasures, dangers, higher branches of knowledge
- Not meeting the standard → removed from/not admitted to high office

Standards (Fulcher, 2016)

▸ Originated in the criterion-referenced testing movement (e.g., Glaser, 1963)

- Originally standards = criterion (synonyms)

- Cut scores
  - Mastery/non-mastery of external standards
    - Mapping documents

1st paragraph, Ofsted report, primary school

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment in September 2017, you have relentlessly focused on raising standards, particularly in writing, and improving the quality of teaching. Following your appointment, you recognised astutely, even before you took up your post, that standards in writing were not as good as they should be. Over time, pupils achieve well in reading and mathematics by the end of Year 6, but pupils' writing skills have lagged behind. In the last six months, pupils' progress in writing has begun to improve. However, there is much more to be done to enable more pupils to achieve the expected standard and for the most able pupils to reach the higher standard by the time they leave the school at the end of Year 6.

Quality of the school & effectiveness of its "improvement plan" described in relation to pupils' performance against the national average (standard)

2014 EDITION NOW AVAILABLE!
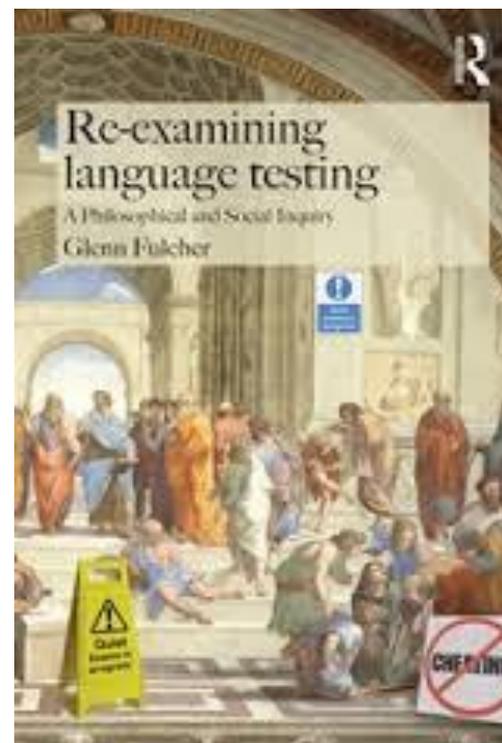**STANDARDS** for Educational and Psychological Testing

▸ First developed by AERA, APA & NCME in 1966

▸ "Gold standard" of developing standards

- guides testing practice, test use (sound, ethical), test quality
  - psychometrically-driven (not content-driven)
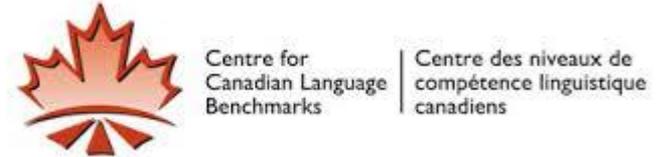
Standards in language testing

O'Sullivan (2013)

Fulcher (2015)

- The term is subject to different interpretations
- We cannot get away from/do away with standards
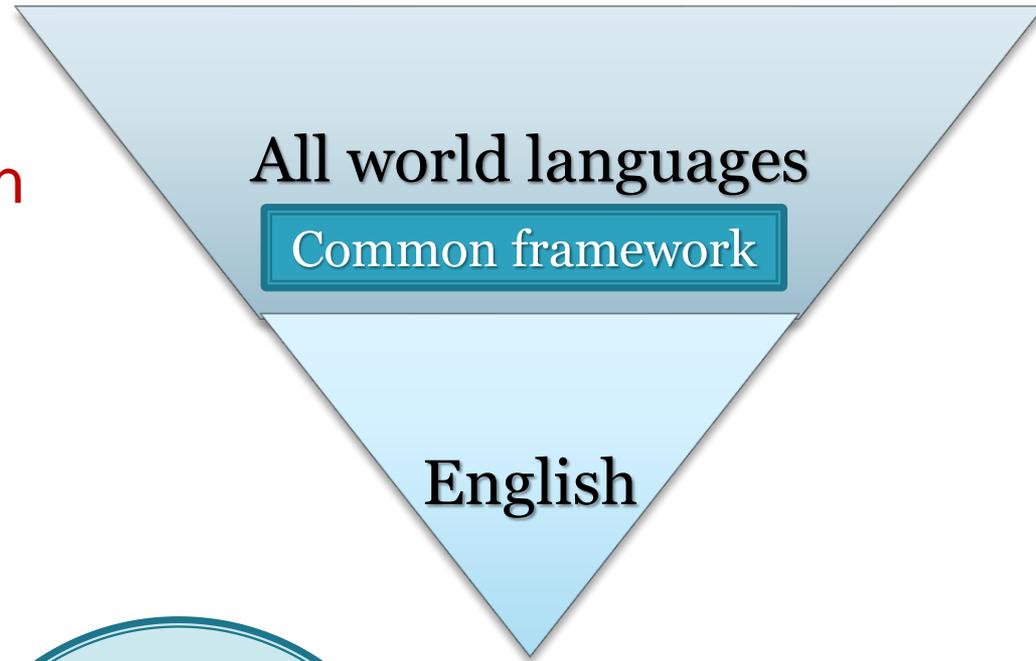
Standards → Frameworks, manuals

How do you anchor the top & bottom rungs of the ladder?
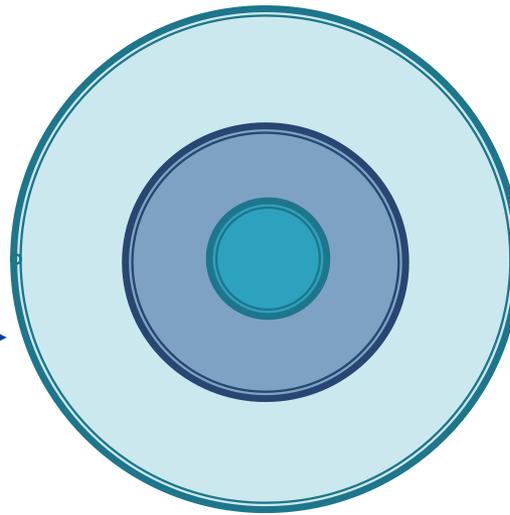
Assessment standards → Standard language

English-centric presentation

All world languages

Common framework

English

Kachru's Concentric Circles (Inner, Outer, Expanding) →

What should the standard be? (AmEng, BrEng, IndEng)

What is the standard?

▸ Difficult to define even for Inner Circle countries

- Received Pronunciation (RP)

  - = BBC English/ Queen's English?

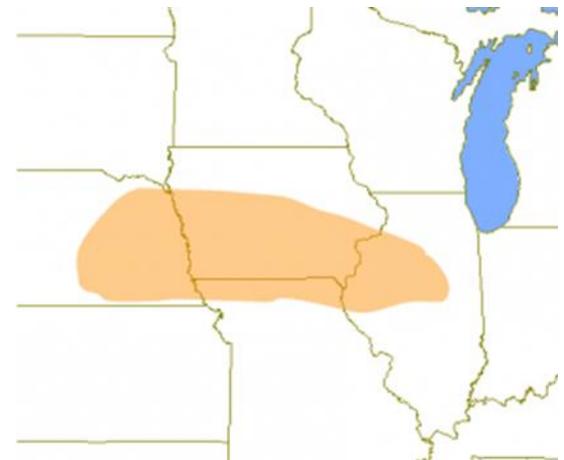## Does the Queen speak the Queen's English?

Jonathan Harrington[1], Sallyanne Palethorpe[1] & Catherine I. Watson[2]

Elizabeth II's traditional pronunciation has been influenced by modern trends.

What is the standard?

▸ Can be difficult to locate geographically

- Definition - General American English defined
  - "cultivated speech, West & Midwest, <u>not East & South</u>" Webster's Intl. dictionary 1930s
  - "few regional peculiarities; Radio & TV announcers" Random House 1966

"Area of the United States where the local accent is ⟶ closest to General American" (Wikimedia Commons)

General American

▸ 3 dialect groups
(Labov et al., 2006):

- **Midland**
  - Cincinnati, OH
  - St. Louis, MO
- **West**
- **Canada**

"Area of the United States where the local accent is closest to General American" (Wikimedia Commons)

Summary - standards

▸ Consensus → there needs to be *some* standard to benchmark performances

▸ What should that standard be?
  - Tension → local vs. global

▸ What is the highest level of performance that learners should be striving for...
  - Not straightforward for domains where "mastery" is often unattainable

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What standard should we be striving for?

▸ Is native-like proficiency an appropriate goal for L2 learning & assessment?

- If not, what is a more suitable standard?

Lots of focus on pronunciation →

* relevant to automated scoring given what the machine can do best

* Accents perceptually salient

Appropriate goal for L2 pronunciation teaching & assessment? (Levis, 2005)

Nativeness principle

⬇

Sound like a **native speaker**; eliminate foreign accent traces

≠

Intelligibility principle

⬇

Speak in a way that is **understandable** to the listener

✱ Appropriate goal!

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Descriptors at the top end of second language (L2) speaking scales

Direct/indirect reference to nativeness?

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Wartime Development in Modern-Language Achievement Testing Kaulfers 1944

▸ First reference to intelligibility in a rating scale

Readily intelligible
A literate native would readily understand what the speaker is saying, and would not be able to identify the speaker's particular foreign nationality.

Top level

Bottom level

Unintelligible or no response
A literate native would not understand what the speaker is saying, or would be *confused* or *mislead*.

ILR Speaking skill level 5: "Functionally native proficiency" (1987)

"Speaking proficiency is <u>functionally equivalent</u> to that of a <u>highly articulate well-educated native speaker</u> & <u>reflects</u> the <u>cultural standards</u> of the <u>country</u> where the language is <u>natively spoken</u>. The individual uses the language with complete flexibility and <u>intuition</u>, so that <u>speech on all levels</u> is <u>fully accepted by well-educated native speakers</u> in all of its features, including breadth of vocabulary and idiom, colloquialisms & pertinent cultural references. Pronunciation is typically consistent with that of well-educated native speakers of a <u>non-stigmatized dialect</u>."

US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

IELTS Speaking band descriptors, public version

▸ Grammatical range & accuracy, band 9

- uses a full range of structures naturally & appropriately
- produces consistently accurate structures apart from 'slips' characteristic of native speaker speech

https://www.ielts.org/-/media/pdfs/speaking-band-descriptors.ashx?la=en

"Old" CEFR Phonological control scale

C1 & C2: Can vary intonation & place sentence stress correctly in order to express finer shades of meaning

B2: Has acquired a clear, natural pronunciation & intonation

B1: Pronunciation is clearly intelligible even if a <u>foreign accent</u> is sometimes evident & occasional mispronunciations occur

A2: Pronunciation is generally clear enough to be understood despite a <u>noticeable foreign accent</u>…

A1: Pronunciation of a very limited repertoire of learnt words and phrases can be understood with some effort by native speakers <u>used to dealing with speakers of his/her language group</u>

PTE Academic - Scoring criteria (Pearson, 2021)

Pronunciation & oral fluency	
5 Native-like	**All** vowels ... in a manner that is easil... language.
4 Advanced	
3 Good	
2 Intermediate	
1 Intrusive	...t ...n-
0 Non-English	Pron... of another languag... mispronounce... Listeners may find **more than 1/2 of the speech unintelligible**.

What is being measured is **not intelligibility**, but rather **deviations** from what human listeners consider to be **NS norms** → reflected in the machine training & scoring methodology (Isaacs, 2018)

Teacher interview comment: "I think you **need a scale**... that **allows successful non-native speakers to be at** the **top end** of the scale. We need to make sure that the scale **reflects** our **judgments about success** and **not** judgments about **who their parents are or their first language**. If you **detect a first language** that **should not put them lower** on the scale."

(Isaacs & Thomson, 2013)

UCL Institute of Education launches world's first comprehensibility scale

18 May 2017

Dr Talia Isaacs from the IOE's Centre for Applied Linguistics has launched the world's first English comprehensibility scale, together with Canadian collaborators. The data-driven scale will help teachers more effectively target the most important linguistic factors for understanding second language English speakers.

Drawing on Dr Isaacs' extensive research in the field, the scale, which is intended for use in academic settings, explicitly states that it is not necessary to sound like a native speaker to achieve the highest level of comprehensibility. This differs from other scales, which often confound the strength of someone's accent with their level of comprehensibility.

As Dr Isaacs explains, "It is possible to have a detectable foreign accent and still be perfectly understandable, but someone who is genuinely difficult to understand is almost always judged

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Measuring Speech: A Comprehensibility Scale for Teachers

🕐 July 17, 2017   👤 Anthony Schmidt   💬 3 Comments

How do you accurately measure someone's comprehensibility? For that matter, what does comprehensibility really mean? Is it a synonym of intelligibility? To what extent do individual sounds, suprasegmentals, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar play a role in all of this? Although pronunciation can often be easily assessed, these assessments are often poorly designed, are too limited (or too detailed), and sometimes use the "native-speaker" as a criteria by which speech is judged (when the reality is this idea is contentious). In the 2017 article summarized below, Isaacs*, Trofimovich, and Foote describe the process by which they used

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Second Language English Comprehensibility Global & Analytic Scales (Isaacs et al., 2018)

5	**Speech is effortless to understand;** Errors are rare and do not interfere with the message. Sounding nativelike is *not* necessary
4	**Speech requires little effort to understand;** Errors minimally interfere with the message
3	**Speech requires some effort to understand;** Errors somewhat interfere with the message
2	**Speech is effortful to understand;** Errors are detrimental to the message
1	**Speech is painstakingly effortful to understand or indecipherable** Errors are debilitating to the message; Not enough comprehensible language is generated for coherent communication
UR	**Unable to Rate the speech;** No assessable speech sample is produced (e.g., unresponsive to the task, no articulation of English-like sounds)

COMP	PRONUNCIATION	FLUENCY	VOCABULARY	GRAMMAR
5	- pronunciation is **effortless to understand** - errors, if present, are rare and/or do not interfere with the message - pitch variation may make the speech sound lively or engaging - sounding nativelike is *not expected*	- fluent speech, which is optimally paced, is **effortless to understand** - hesitation markers are used at appropriate junctures or strategically to sustain listener attention	- precise lexical choice relevant to the task is **effortless to understand** - errors, if present, are rare and/or do not interfere with the message - nuanced idiomatic expressions may be present, depending on the task	grammatical use conveys precise meaning or nuance, resulting in speech that is **effortless to understand** - errors, if present, are rare and/or do not interfere with the message - complex sentences may be used, depending on the task
4	- pronunciation requires **little effort to understand** - errors are few and/or minimally interfere with the message - speech may be characterized by too many or too few variations in pitch, sounding disjointed or monotone	- mostly fluent speech, which may be slightly too fast or slow, requires **little effort to understand** - hesitation markers are generally used at appropriate junctures	- sufficient lexical choice mostly relevant to the task requires **little effort to understand** - errors are few and/or minimally interfere with the message - unusual or less familiar lexical expressions may be used	grammatical use mostly conveys precise meaning, resulting in speech that requires **little effort to understand** - errors are few and/or minimally interfere with the message - a mix of simple and complex sentences are used
3	- pronunciation requires **some effort to understand** - errors are occasional and/or somewhat interfere with the message (e.g., misplaced word stress, sound substitutions, not stressing important words in a sentence)	- somewhat fluent speech, which is too fast or slow, requires **some effort to understand** - hesitation markers are occasionally used at inappropriate junctures	- simple lexical choice requires **some effort to understand** - errors are occasional and/or somewhat interfere with the message - occasional gaps in vocabulary make the speech somewhat laboured, although meaning is still roughly conveyed	- grammatical use conveys general meaning, resulting in speech that requires **some effort to understand** - errors are occasional and/or somewhat interfere with the message - simpler sentences are used instead of more complex ones
2	- pronunciation is **effortful to understand** - errors are frequent and/or detrimental to the message (e.g., misplaced word stress, sound substitutions, not stressing important words in a sentence) - production difficulties may obscure the meaning of a few words	- speech, which is markedly dysfluent or too fast, is **effortful to understand** - hesitation markers are frequently used at inappropriate junctures - compensatory strategies are used to offset gaps in fluency (e.g., ideas are described in a roundabout way, self-correction)	- limited lexical choice and frequent lexical errors are **effortful to understand** - errors are frequent and/or detrimental to the message - frequent gaps in vocabulary may make the speech laboured or unelaborated - lexical chunks may be used to compensate for limited vocabulary	- grammatical use may obscure meaning, resulting in speech that is **effortful to understand** - errors are frequent and/or detrimental to the message - only basic sentence structures are used
1	- pronunciation is **painstakingly effortful to understand** - errors are numerous and/or debilitating to the message (e.g., misplaced word stress, sound substitutions, not stressing important words in a sentence) - production difficulties may make words sound slurred or indistinct	- speech, which is extremely dysfluent or much too fast, is **painstakingly effortful to understand** - hesitation markers are very frequently used at inappropriate junctures, leading to halting or "broken" speech - no compensatory strategies are used to offset gaps in fluency	- extremely simplistic or limited lexical choice and very frequent lexical errors make the speech **painstakingly effortful to understand** - errors are numerous and/or debilitating to the message - frequent gaps in vocabulary make the speech unelaborated or indecipherable - no lexical chunks are used to compensate for limited vocabulary	- grammatical use obscures meaning, making the speech **painstakingly effortful to understand** - errors are numerous and/or debilitating to the message - only very basic or fragmented sentences are used
UR	Unable to Rate. Speaker does not produce an assessable sample of speech (e.g., unresponsive to the task, no articulation of English-like sounds)			

1 = low comprehensibility; 5 = high comprehensibility

NOTE: The pronunciation and fluency criteria may weigh more heavily in assessments of comprehensibility than the vocabulary and grammar criteria

Isaacs et al. 2018

한국어 발음 진단 검사

Korean Pronunciation Diagnostic

소개 - Introduction

한국어 발음 진단 검사 (KPD)는 무엇 인가요?

What is the Korean Pronunciation Diagnostic (KPD)?

Isbell (2019): https://sites.google.com/view/koreanpronunciationdiagnostic

Talia Isaacs @TaliaIsaacs · Sep 3

Nicely explained: "Pronunciation scores are not a measure of how close to a native speaker you are. Rather, pronunciation scores reflect how consistently a listener can accurately identify the sound you tried to make."
sites.google.com/view/koreanpro...

Dan Isbell @Daniel_R_Isbell · Sep 2

Very happy to make the Korean Pronunciation Diagnostic/한국어 발음 진 단 검사 available to the public. Test tasks and related materials ready to be used for identifying learner L2 Korean pronunciation difficulties. #L2pronunciation #assessment
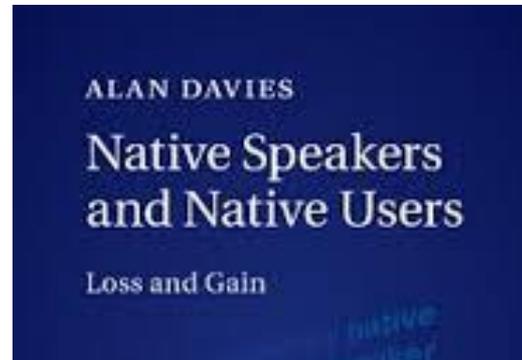
Who qualifies as a NS?

▸ Mismatch between self- and other- perceptions for English as a Foreign Language teachers (Inbar-Lourie, 2005)
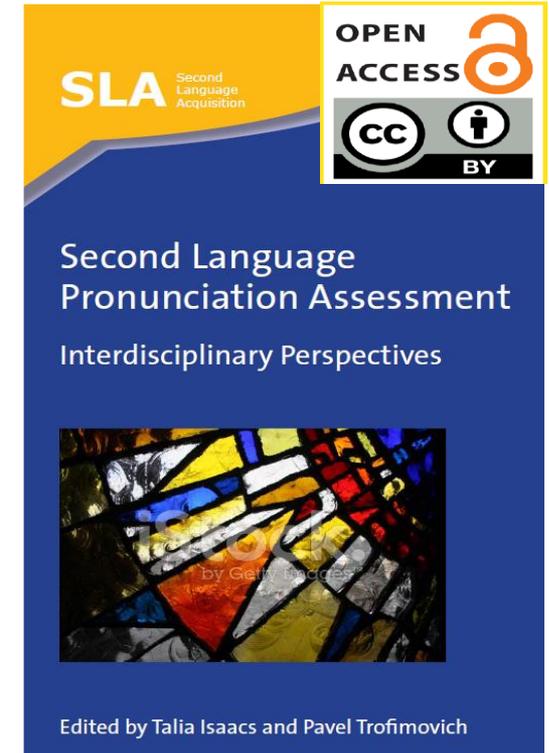
"Defining features of a NS" → Any or all of the following (Nayar, 1994):

a) Primacy in order of acquisition

b) Manner & environment of acquisition

c) Acculturation by growing up in the speech community

d) Phonological, linguistic & communicative competence

e) Dominance, frequency & comfort of use

f) Ethnicity

g) Nationality/domicile

h) Self-perception of linguistic identity

i) Other-perception of linguistic membership & eligibility

j) **Monolinguality** "guarantees unexceptional eligibility to native speakerdom on its own strength, as the person has no other language to be native of"

Alan Davies (1931-2015)

The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality

ALAN DAVIES
Native Speakers and Native Users
Loss and Gain

In memory of Alan Davies

OPEN ACCESS

SLA Second Language Acquisition

Second Language Pronunciation Assessment
Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by Talia Isaacs and Pavel Trofimovich

- Native speakers → all of us (we are all NSs of some language)

- *The* native speaker → idealization

2017

Alan Davies' view

▸ Does not challenge SLA's cognitive position on the NS, **BUT**

▸ For applied linguistics (sociolinguistic tradition) where context is primary, the NS/native user distinction is moot
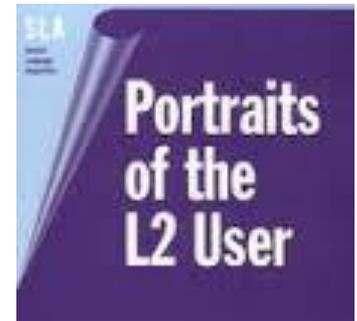
▸ Argues for perpetuating the standard language norm

Alan Davies

▸ Emphasizes standard language as the object of institutional learning within a speech community

- can be accessed & appropriated by anyone, whether native of nonnative, through **education**

Not always clear which variety should be propped up as the standard language (prestige variety) in some contexts

Multicompetence perspective

Portraits of the L2 User

Cook, 2002

▸ Brown (2013) – Use descriptions of performance features of **multicompetent** (as opposed to monocompetent **NSs**) for assessment purposes
  - high proficiency L2 speakers

IELTS

Q: Are all of your examiners native speakers of English?
A: IELTS does not discriminate between native and non-native English speakers, for either test takers or Examiners. All our Examiners undergo a rigorous process of application, interview, training, certification and monitoring, and need to be expert users of English with a fully operational command of the language.

Why I dislike the term "L2 user" (Cook, 2002), "native user" (Davies, 2012) & "Lx user" (Dewaele, 2017)

Definitions:
a person who uses or operates something.

a person who **exploits** others.

a person who frequently uses illegal **drugs.**

Concordance for *equals* USER in bncoca_1-2.txt, Compleat Lexical Tutor (Cobb)

```
ious item that Cokie is almost certainly not a past cocaine USER guesses not Rather Chatterbox suspects Cokie of being
jurisdiction is none of your business Photograph of cocaine USER on the Slate Table of Contents by Corbis Roger Ressmey
ife Web site he was confronted with an unbelievably complex USER agreement requiring Chatterbox to promise in advance
ople in colleges and things so they re if you re a computer USER so my daughter has talked to two students uh that were
taken a number of years to develop and involve considerable USER training might be expected to have much longer econom
ts core competence as a company that makes sharply designed USER friendly high performance products for consumers who
 was no big deal you know it s like i wasn t a regular drug USER but uh oh i have a lot of friends that just are uh sm
and once you ve established the fact that you re not a drug USER and um  especially if your personality proves that
e i d was so brazen before i m like i say i m a former drug USER but uh i i uh huh well uh i accepted Christ as my Lor
eah i mean once the expectations are uh being a former drug USER whoa i uh i d i guess i have to say at this point tha
ed based on on uh perception that someone has of how a drug USER would behave when some drugs users behave uh huh uh n
ey should have the right to send them well not being a drug USER i don t have a problem with that personally but i thi
f anything other than being an ambitious loudmouth and drug USER Another reason the critics are letting Bloomfield get
know for suspecting that person as you know as being a drug USER or you know whatever and i mean you wouldn t uh you w
that because you don t you don t want somebody who s a drug USER starting work for you but i don t i don t think that
u know that i would know about that you know i m not a drug USER i have not ever been and will not ever be but i you k
```

Supplanting the NS standard - Jenkins (2002)

▸ Lingua Franca Core (phonological syllabus) → promote intelligibility, regional appropriateness, be more teachable

- No need to dipthongize vowels
- Replace 'th' sound (_thank_, _then_) with /f/ and /v/
- Emphasis on segmentals; Prosody deemphasised

▸ More empirical evidence needed before it can be

- generalized across instructional contexts
- adopted as a standard for assessment"

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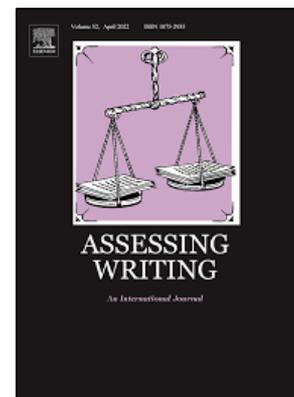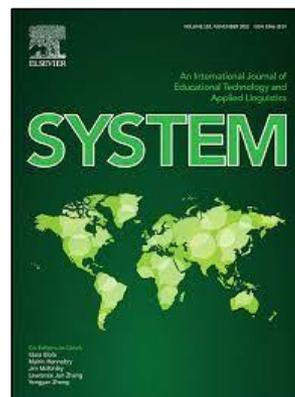# Editors' review: SLA edited volume (2011)

"We're wondering if (you) might consider using an alternative label for the term "nonnative"? While we may not completely agree with those who strenuously object to the label & the comparative fallacy that it reinforces, we do recognize that it is a polarizing term."

Peer reviewer, TESOL Quarterly (2020)

"I am a non-native speaker of English and I do find the repetitive reference to L1 users and L2 users highly confusing. Why not simply [use] native speaker vs. non-native speaker?"

Guide for Authors: Some Elsevier journals

"Authors should ensure that writing is free from bias, stereotypes, slang, reference to dominant culture and/or cultural assumptions (this includes avoiding the terms "native speaker" and "non-native speaker" to refer to language background or proficiency unless critically engaging with the terms; authors should use terms such as English L1 and L2 speaker instead)."
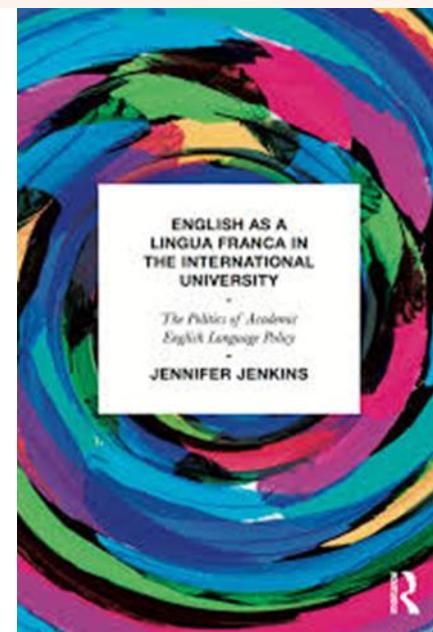
Teaching Assistant (temp.), Ghent University, Aug. 2012

- Master of Linguistics & Literature in English (or equivalent)
- **near-native (or native) proficiency** in the English language
- master thesis on an aspect of English linguistics
- other professional activities and/or professional experience(s) that can contribute to the quality of teaching English linguistics

Teaching Assistant (temp.), Ghent University, Aug. 2012

- Master of Linguistics and Literature in English (or equivalent)
- **near-native (or native) proficiency** in the English language

Jenkins: "I thought BAAL members had agreed not to post any more job adverts asking for 'native' English (whatever that is). Or is it okay if **the 'n' word** is in brackets, preceded by 'near-native or', and followed by 'proficiency'?"

ENGLISH AS A
LINGUA FRANCA IN
THE INTERNATIONAL
UNIVERSITY

The Politics of Academic
English Language Policy

JENNIFER JENKINS

2013

Lecturer in English (ESP/ESL), Univerity of Debrecen, May 2016

▸ "preference will be given to English L1 speakers"

▸ "Due to the nature of the funding, the position is not open to Hungarian citizens."

Exemplar BAAL Mail subscriber response: "I strongly believe that these adverts should not be circulated at all... as they are as prejudiced as racial discriminatory practices."

Call for civility [BAAL web editor]: "We also need to remember that the wayward behaviour of others is more likely to be thoughtless than malicious."

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Jenkins' BAAL mail response

▸ Each time this issue resurfaces, "it's agreed that adverts requiring/giving preference to 'native'/'L1' speakers of English or similar have no place in BAAL

▸ Proposed solutions
- such ads be removed as soon as spotted (unfeasible)
- BAAL members reply to the person posting the advert (but not cc'd to all) writing "No thank you", spamming his/her inbox

Defense posted on behalf of Mária Czellér

▸ "…stunned by the immediate condemnation… The speed with which our advertisement was labelled racist & discriminatory suggests that those… express[ing] such views did not think it necessary to consider the context."

▸ "Hungarian Ministry of Education ring-fences funds for the fixed-term employment of lectors"
  • enables students to be exposed to NS in addition to L2 varieties in a context where this is otherwise prohibitive

Double standards; exposing hypocrisy

▸ Job adverts for teaching Hungarian at foreign universities require Hungarian NSs & citizens

▸ UK university adverts: "native/near-native
- "...proficiency in spoken & written Japanese" (Durham)
- "...competence in French & in English" (Bristol)
- "proficiency in Spanish; knowledge of current affairs & cultural life in Spanish-speaking countries & regions" (Sheffield)

▸ "Unlike our colleagues in Britain, we reserve judgement, but we ask why exactly we are treated differently."

Research recommendations Isaacs & Rose (2021)

- ▸ appeal for decency
- ▸ broad tent of applied linguistics
- ▸ accept that NS benchmarks will persist in accuracy-focused research
  - • lack of alternative codifiable global standard
- ▸ much of what we know about L2 acquisition is built on studies investigating NS processes/or performance
  - • branch out from this benchmark to make other comparisons

Research recommendations Isaacs & Rose (2021)

▸ researchers shouldn't treat NSs as a monolith in participant recruitment & research reporting
▸ studies drawing on NS controls/norms should have a good justification
  • consider utility of eliciting ceiling performance
▸ could lead to a more careful operationalization of NS & more transparent research reporting

UCL

Thank you!

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@taliaisaacs