"I always tell them who I am”: Social identity and legitimacy in very advanced L2 use

Katharina Ruuska
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Highly proficient or near-native late multilinguals are usually taken as insightful, albeit slightly exceptional examples of successful language learners. However, having engaged extensively with L2 use in real life situations, these language users’ experiences can provide insights beyond reaching what is usually meant by communicative competence (i.e. linguistic accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness) and highlight the challenge of creating legitimate social and linguistic identities within a community of target language speakers (Kramsch 2012).

In this paper, I take a closer look at the construction of such social identities as experienced by speakers themselves. My discussion is based on 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with L2 speakers of Finnish who only started learning the language as adults and who have reached a very advanced proficiency level, including the ability to ‘pass for native speakers’ (Piller 2002) at least on some occasions and for some period of time. The analysis shows that rather than simply moving on from the status of a learner to the status of a competent speaker of an additional language, very advanced L2 speakers construct, highlight or downplay their various social identities according to situational needs and language ideological constraints. In this sense, both ‘doing’ being a learner or L2 user and ‘doing’ being a proficient speaker or even a native speaker can be part of my participants’ struggle for social and linguistic legitimacy (Bourdieu 1977).


Keywords: legitimacy, ideology, identity, high-proficiency L2 users.