From ideal to idiolect: the trajectories of nativeness within and without SLA research

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This presentation will consider representations of the native speaker over the last 100 years, with particular focus on the acquisition of English. The highly influential Newbolt Report (1921) into the teaching of English in England is explicit in maintaining that working class children are not successful native speakers until they enter education. The same assumption is made in the work of Berstein and Bereiter & Englemann in the 1960s and 1970s, that working class children are native speakers with deficits (as it were). The work of Chomsky makes the polar opposite assumption, that human languages are biologically and not socially determined, and children therefore become fully competent native speakers of any language system(s) in their immediate environment. Later work (e.g. Hall 2012) opens another perspective in conceiving of the linguistic experience of every individual acquirer as giving rise to a unique idiolect rather than a shared native-speaker competence within a speech community.

This presentation will explore the particular difficulties these multiple conceptualisations of native speakerdom present to second language acquisition research and second language teaching. Does everyone need to learn the prestige standard dialect through formal education, whether they be children still in the midst of FLA, or adults in the midst of SLA? If so, can we legitimately categorise people as native speakers and non-native speakers? If languages are giant collections of idiolects, can we conceive of one target for adult learners to be taught and tested against? In the case of English, with its global reach and cultural dominance, is it tolerable to use the minority native speaker performance as a baseline to assess the competence of non-native majority? Or does a fundamental difference between FLA and SLA (Bley-Vroman 1989, 2009) mean native speakers and expert users are not one and the same thing.

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