New speakers and linguistic mudes: becoming, passing and belonging

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In their critique of the dominance of the native speaker paradigm, Rampton (1995) and Piller (2002) promote the alternative notion of the speaker’s ‘expertise’, substituting the idea of where she comes from with what she knows. Piller’s study of advanced learners who sometimes ’pass’ as native speakers of their target languages indicates that personal factors like motivation and choice are often more important factors in ultimate attainment than age of first exposure to the second language.

In this paper, Piller’s notion of ‘expert users’ is applied to a group of highly-proficient new speakers of three minoritised European languages (Irish, Catalan and Basque), many of whom have adopted more traditional forms of the language and have reported ’passing’ as native speakers. Based on a corpus of approximately 70 in-depth interviews and 12 focus groups, participants’ experiences of ’becoming’ new speakers are examined across the life cycle. Based on Pujolar and González (2012), the paper also charts speakers’ linguistic ’mudes’ (biographical moments leading to the adoption of the language in social situations) and examines the link between ’mudes’ and increased proficiency. The notion of ’muda’ provides a crucial theoretical standpoint to our approach because we study how linguistic practices of multilinguals evolve and change throughout the life cycle. So, by focusing on ”how individuals become new speakers, we turn these phenomena into processes characterised by change, movement and maturation rather than staticity and placeness.” (Pujolar and Puigdevall, forthcoming).

The paper will include extracts from interviews with a selection of this expert new speaker sample. It is hoped that this research will shed further light on what it means to become a new speaker as well as understanding the triggers behind the ”mudes”, which can help language users, language activists and policy makers become more aware and develop actions that better support them.

Keywords: ”minority language”, ”new speakers”, ”mudes”.