

Speaking from Experience

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This paper recapitulates the address given on the second day of the conference by the author as a representative of the hosting department. It is based on my personal experience as a lifelong learner of English and university professor, rather than on expert research on the subject. I recall the most embarrassing English errors I made during my teaching career, present evidence of the power of preconceived notions in judging language performance from my childhood and from my son's youth, and provide examples of varying language use by English native speakers that present problems for the concept of linguistic "correctness." I conclude by stressing the value of linguistic diversity found in the U.S. and the wisdom of nurturing the richness of linguistic heritages this country possesses.

I will share in this paper some of the thoughts about language use that have occurred to me in the course of my lifelong language learning and language speaking experience. The main points I make are as follows:

- As a university instructor who is a speaker of English as a foreign language, I have made outrageous errors, yet my students, evidently, survived them.
- When I was a junior high school student in Japan, my English was judged to have a Spanish accent, although I had never had any contact with speakers of Spanish.
- When my son spoke perfect English in New Jersey, customers did not understand him, but when he used a fake Japanese accent, they understood him right away.
- These examples show that we hear what we expect to hear, and not what is actually being said.
- The linguistic diversity of Los Angeles calls for appreciation of heritage speakers.
- Native speakers of English produce a variety of forms that violate so-called norms of "correct" English usage of their times.

- Those who teach English need to be aware of the variety of linguistic choices native speakers make, as much as those who set language policies need to be sensitive to the value heritage speakers add to the linguistic capital of the U.S.

What motivated students and faculty at the UCLA Department of Applied Linguistics to organize the First Annual Public Conference on Linguistic Diversity in American Classrooms in August 2010 was the fact that first or second language acquisition and bilingualism are what most applied linguists do, combined with the recognition of responsibility universities have towards the society at large. There was a sense that the decisions the Arizona State Department of Education was making could use informed input from applied linguists in the US and abroad, and we wanted to create a forum where they could share their expertise with education practitioners. We believed that a public university's mission is to interact with the public, so we brought together community practitioners (teachers, students, parents, media intellectuals), general public, and specialists (scholars, researchers) to share and to learn from each other. I am pleased to be able to say that the response of the UCLA community to our call for the support of this conference was overwhelming.

Applied Linguistics is an interdisciplinary field. It covers many other areas of language studies besides language acquisition or bilingualism, and my own research happens to be unrelated to these two areas. In asking myself why I became involved in this conference project I discovered that, in addition to the rational reason and the sense of professional responsibility just mentioned, there were also personal reasons for me to step outside of my own research interests and become engaged in the organization of this conference. These reasons were not necessarily rational, but perhaps for that reason they were all the more powerful, and they were much more subtle. I would like to share them with you, but first I must tell you something about my personal language background. I am neither a native speaker of English nor a speaker of English as a second language. I am a speaker of English as a foreign language, which is to say, I learned English at school while living in a non-English-speaking country. Almost all of my English teachers were not native speakers of English. In fact, as I acquired education, all the way up through graduate school, I learned many languages, and most of them were taught to me by non-native speakers of those languages. My three children grew up in the US in a household where three languages were regularly spoken across the dinner table. They are now native speakers of educated literary American English. When, on the first day of this conference, we watched the video of Tom Horne, the Arizona State Department of Education Superintendent, speaking about the Arizona teachers' English fluency on CNN¹, he mentioned that he, too, acquired his standard American English despite growing up in a household with his Polish-speaking parents. Evidently the heritage language Mr. Horne grew up with in his family did not prevent him from acquiring native English, much in the

same way my children's heritage languages did not prevent them from acquiring their standard English. The same can be said about thousands of heritage speakers of other languages, many of whom I encounter among UCLA students every day. I will return to this point later.

Over my long career as a college professor, I have taught many courses and delivered many talks in English, a language I learned as a foreign language. So here comes the critical question: is my English intelligible? Is it error-free? Evidently, it was intelligible enough to earn me jobs at first rate universities and receive teaching evaluations in the upper range of the scale, yet some errors I made are indeed memorable. As an assistant professor at Harvard, I once said "khandom" instead of "khanate," and since the non-existent word "khandom" sounds just like "condom," I still remember the uneasy expressions on my students' faces. Just as Gustavo Arellano told us at this conference about his experience as a UCLA student of mispronouncing the word "gamut" (with "u" pronounced like that in "put") for a long time without anybody correcting him, my students at Harvard did not correct my "khandom" either. But because their funny expressions bothered me, I went home and checked the dictionary, only to find out that the word for the realm ruled by a khan was not formed in the same way as the word for the realm ruled by a king: kings rule over "kingdoms" but khans rule over "khanates"! In my next class I corrected my error to my students' satisfaction. I am still not sure if they understood what I meant to say the first time, or even the second time around; perhaps not all of them did, since "khanate" is a rather rare word in English anyway. Another memorable English error happened when I arrived at UCLA in 1995. This error had to do with phonetics. In one of my first graduate lectures at UCLA I distributed handouts and told the students that everyone should have four "shits," meaning, of course, that they should each have four "sheets." Again, my students, politely, did not correct me, although they blinked in a strange way making me feel that something was wrong. Then one of them said that he had only three "sheets". This made me realize that I had just failed to lengthen the vowel in that word, and that explained the students' funny reactions. Oh well, we, aliens and ex-aliens (or, to put it in legal terms, holders of student, worker, visitor, or permanent resident visas, and naturalized U.S. citizens) make errors and sometimes they can be quite risqué. I wonder how many such errors the German born former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger² or the Polish-born former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski³ have made over their lifetime, or, for that matter, California's own Austrian-born former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger⁴.

Learning languages and using the languages I learned has been a big part of my life experience as well as of my professional life. And one big lesson I have drawn from my linguistic life experience is that – when it comes to actual communication – the fluid, subjective and unarticulated factor of *perception* can easily override the objective, measurable, and describable aspects of linguistic performance. I will give you two examples, one from my personal experience in Japan and one from my son's experience in New Jersey.

In 1959, I won a regional junior high English language competition and became a representative of my region in all-Japan finals. At the finals in Tokyo, I won 3rd place. From some of the judges' comments, I learned that I lost a few points for my "Spanish" accent. This surprised me because I had never heard Spanish at that time, nor did I know anybody who spoke Spanish or any other Romance language. I wondered about these comments for a long time, and I think I finally have an explanation. It is rather convoluted but I will try to explain it to you now, although to do so I must go back more than 450 years. It so happens that the region I represented at this contest in Tokyo was generally known as the place where Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary, arrived in 1550 to preach Christianity. He left Japan for good two years later, in 1552. A generation later, in 1587, Christianity was outlawed in Japan and it stayed prohibited for three centuries, during which time foreigners' residence remained restricted to a couple of port cities where foreigners lived in segregated quarters. In the 1880's, Jesuit missionaries returned to the quaint town which Francis Xavier had visited in the 16th century, and from that point on the town came to be known as the place where one could always find a Catholic priest, generally understood to be a Spaniard. Fast forward now to 1952, when a big St. Xavier Cathedral was built in this town to commemorate his visit 400 years earlier. It made big national news, highlighting the history of Spanish missionary activities in the area. This event must still have been prominent in the minds of the English contest jury in Tokyo, when they judged my performance, associating my English with the region I represented, famous for its Jesuit mission. Coming from a remote region that was visited by Francis Xavier in mid-sixteenth century and was associated with Spaniard priests, I must have learned my English – so they evidently thought – from a Spaniard. This must be how some of the judges decided that my English was "tainted" by Spanish. Admittedly, I will never be able to prove that this explanation is correct, but what else could possibly account for their hearing Spanish accent in my English, given that the accent you hear in it actually never sounded like a Spanish accent? These judges heard what they expected to hear.

If this explanation sounds too farfetched, I will now present the second example, which is more recent and which was actually "tested." It dates back to the late 1990's, when my son was working at a gas station in a sleepy little New Jersey town near Princeton. As I already mentioned, my three children speak beautiful, educated New England American English. But – my son *looks* Asian. Working at this gas station, he noticed that when he approached a car and, in his impeccable and polite English, asked what he could do for them, some customers did not understand him. He often had to repeat his question once or twice before they responded with a request to fill their tanks or check their oil. It once dawned on him to ask his question with a fake Japanese accent, which he, having a perfect ear for music and languages, could easily produce. To his delight, his customers now began to understand him on the first try (I actually did not think it was something to be delighted about). At our Linguistic Diversity Conference several pieces of

research were reported (for example, see Lindemann in this volume) that have now fully confirmed the results of this informal mini-experiment my son conducted in New Jersey more than 10 years ago. When people in East coast suburbia saw an Asian face, they expected accented English. When what they heard did not correspond to what they expected, they could not process what they had heard. The impeccable native American English coming from an Asian youth ended up simply unintelligible to them.

The implications of these two stories are clear: we form our expectations (or you can call them ‘prejudices’) and carry them around with us at all times, be they based on some media reports (like those of the St. Xavier Cathedral built in a remote Japanese province) or on our visual perceptions and racial stereotypes (like those of Japs or Chinks with their laughable “fled lice”). The power of perceptions, prejudices and stereotypes is tremendous and *nobody* is exempt from the possibility of falling under its influence. In a way, stereotypes are a natural product of our cognitive limitation and of our need to simplify our lives by providing quick references to fall back upon when we come into contact with unscripted realities. But prejudices do hurt and people need to be made aware of that. Prejudices also cause societies to waste valuable resources by shutting out talent and embittering those who are on the receiving side of prejudiced treatment. And they can lead to much graver damage done to multitudes of people, as history tells us about the last century alone. Societies must put in place safeguards against the harm that originates in human cognitive limitations, and we, language professionals, must help make people aware of the prejudices and stereotypes related to language. This conference project – for me – turned out to be an opportunity to think about the power of perceptions and prejudices, as well as to contribute my two cents’ worth towards a joint effort to help us all overcome human cognitive limitations.

I now return to the question of heritage speakers in Los Angeles, which is inseparable from the question of bilingualism. There are no less than 220 languages spoken in Los Angeles (almost a hundred of which are being taught in Los Angeles schools⁵).

Speaker communities of these languages in Los Angeles range from dozens or several hundred to several hundred thousand and more. If we look at the world as a whole, there are approximately 6000 languages spoken in the world today.⁶ In terms of the number of speakers, however, half of the world’s population now speaks no more than 20 languages total. It is a remarkable fact that in Los Angeles you can find all of these 20 languages. At this time of globalization, heritage languages in Los Angeles (and the same is obviously true about the rest of the United States) are a formidable financial, political, economic, and cultural resource. If you want to put a price tag on this resource, try to estimate how much money and time would be needed to teach all these languages to Americans if they had to learn them from scratch in schools. By supporting these various speaker communities and by sustaining their pride in their heritage languages, the U.S. can save uncountable millions of dollars every year.

And here is the other side of the coin: most of the heritage speakers in the U.S., whose first language is not English, also speak English. This makes bilingualism and the existence of speakers of English as a second or a foreign language a fact of life for all people of Los Angeles (and in the country as a whole). Given this, it is rather confounding that appreciation of the linguistic diversity in America is usually missing among its public. To contemplate this odd situation, let me first contemplate a parallel oddity, the surprisingly confusing situation with what constitutes “correct” English. As is the case with most things we take for granted – and our native language is one of such things, – our knowledge of most facts related to our native languages is actually not as clear-cut as we might want to think. Nevertheless, we all somehow feel that we are experts on our native languages and are entitled to judge what the right way to use them is. But are we, really? Ask a room full of “real” native speakers of American English which of *between John and I* and *between John and me* is the “right” usage, and you will get a surprising variety of answers. I am sure, moreover, that if you had asked this question 50 years ago or asked it 50 years later, the ratio of variation would be different from what you get today. So which version is then “correct” English? Or consider this one: which is the “right” way to say, *my mother and my father* or *my father and my mother*? In case your answer is that either one is OK, this is not what Sir Thomas Wilson would have told you in his best selling *The Arte of Rhetorique*, which was published and republished many times between 1553 and 1588. Sir Wilson was quite clear about what the right way was, as you can see from his own words: “Some will set the cart before the horse, as thus, *My mother and my father are both at home*. [...] let us keep a natural order, and set the man before the woman for manners sake” (p. 167).

This means that if in the 16th century you said *my mother and my father*, you would not have been hired as an English teacher in England or, for that matter, probably not even in New England in the 17th century. And here is my most favorite example: how would you rate the sentence “*In adopting the United States of America as your homeland, I want to congratulate you as a new citizen of this nation we hold so dear.*”? You would be a bad English teacher if you did not correct this sentence and tell your students not to use “dangling participles” of this sort (the participle *adopting* is “dangling” because its assumed subject, which is *you*, the naturalized citizen receiving this letter, is not the same as subject of the main clause, which is *I*, the man who signed it). The reason this is my favorite example is because this was the very first sentence in the congratulatory form letter signed by President Reagan which I received when I became a naturalized U.S. citizen. Evidently, the President’s aids or the Immigration and Naturalization officials who composed this letter did not notice that they used a “dangling participle”, despite what their school teachers must have told them many times. So, do native speakers of American English actually know what is “right” and what is “wrong” in their native language? And if they do, why is there such variance? Could it be that they are missing something that can explain this confusing variation, something that

we linguists may be able to explain to them? You can guess what my answers to these questions are.

Just as even native English language school teachers evidently miss something when they formulate their rules of “correct” English usage, those who work in the areas where policies related to heritage languages and to linguistic diversity figure prominently, and who may be aware of the existence of bilingualism among immigrant children and their immigrant teachers, may be missing something. Most of them appear to have their answers about language and bilingualism ready, and those answers are usually based on untested stereotypes. The events in Arizona put into focus some of the issues that are critical in linguistically diverse American communities. There is no question that we do want all learners of English to succeed in acquiring good English. We want them to succeed just as Tom Horne, my three children, and millions of other heritage speakers of various languages have succeeded in doing since the very beginning of this country of immigrants. But at the same time we do want to preserve the cultural dignity of all the heritage languages (as well as preserving the heritage languages themselves, but that is yet another topic). We do not want to allow our linguistic stereotyping and the cognitive inertia underlying it to stigmatize them, or to stigmatize any traces of them that may slip into the speech of speakers of English as a second or a foreign language. These slips are not as critical as you may think and their effect on intelligibility may well be explained by the stereotypes we subscribe to rather than by reality: remember that the customers in New Jersey understood my son’s fake accented English better than his natural impeccable English. The goal of this *public* conference was to share with the public what we do in the ‘ivory tower,’ including what we have found out about the power of linguistic stereotyping and the stigma based on it – since the understanding of language-related facts and issues that we in academia possess ultimately serves the best interests of the American public.

Notes

1. See the transcripts of this show at <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1005/24/ltm.03.html>.
2. National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Born in Germany in 1923 and moved to the U.S. in 1938. Kissinger received his PhD from Harvard University and taught there for many years.
3. National Security Advisor under Jimmy Carter. Born in Poland in 1928 and moved to Canada in 1945. Brzezinski received his PhD from Harvard University and taught at Harvard, Columbia and Johns Hopkins.
4. The 38th Governor of California, 2003-2010. Born in Austria in 1947 and moved to the U.S. in 1968. Propelled to Hollywood stardom in 1984 as the Terminator, even though his accent was so strong in his first role of Hercules in 1970 that his lines had to be dubbed.
5. The information on the linguistic diversity in Los Angeles and the world presented here draws on the UCLA Professor V.V. Ivanov’s 2002-2003 course “Languages of Los

Angeles". See the website for the corresponding project at <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/languagesofla>; printed references include Allen & Turner (1997), Waldinger & Bozorgmehr (1996), and Leonard Pitt & Dale Pitt (1997).

6. Out of the (approximately) 6000 spoken in the world now no more than 600 will probably survive by the middle of the XXI century.

References

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