



**On the native/nonnative speaker notion and World
Englishes: Debating with K. Rajagopalan**
*Sobre o conceito falante nativo/falante não-nativo e
“World Englishes”: Um debate com K. Rajagopalan*

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“No one, indeed, can exist for an instant
without performing action.”

The BHAGAVAD GITA, cited by
Rajagopalan (1982:i).

ABSTRACT

In a series of three articles published in the Journal of Pragmatics (1995, henceforth JP), the purpose of the papers is to question the division of English spoken in the world into, on one hand, “native” varieties (British English, American English, Australian English) and, on the other, “new/nonnative” varieties (Indian English, Singaporean English, Nigerian English). The JP articles are indeed groundbreaking for they mark one of the first interactions among scholars from the East with researchers in the West with regard to the growth and spread of the language as well as the roles English is made to play by its impressive number of users. The privileged

I would like to thank DELTA’s two anonymous reviewers for their precious comments on a previous version of this article. Needless to say, all remaining mistakes are my own.

position of prestige and power attributed to the inner circle varieties (USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) is questioned. Rajagopalan (1997, motivated by his reading of the JP papers, adds another dimension to this questioning by pointing to the racial and discriminatory stance underlying the notions “native speaker” and “nonnative speaker” (henceforth, respectively NS and NNS). Rajagopalan has written extensively on the issue of nativity or “nativeness”; over the years, Schmitz has also written on the same topic. There appears, in some cases, to be a number of divergent views with regard to subject on hand on the part of both authors. The purpose of this article is to engage in a respectful debate to uncover misreading and possible misunderstanding on the part of Schmitz. Listening to one another and learning from each another are essential in all academic endeavors.

Key-words: *native speaker; non-native speaker; nationalism; racial discrimination.*

RESUMO

Numa série de três artigos publicados no Journal of Pragmatics (1995, doravante JP), a finalidade dos trabalhos foi questionar a divisão do inglês falado no mundo, por um lado, em variedades “nativas” (inglês britânico, inglês americano, inglês australiano) e, por outro, em variedades “novas/não-nativas” (inglês indiano, inglês singapuriano, inglês nigeriano). Os artigos publicados no JP são pioneiros por marcarem uma das primeiras interações entre pesquisadores do Oriente com os do Ocidente com respeito ao crescimento e divulgação do referido idioma bem como os papéis que o inglês é destinado a desempenhar por parte do grande número de usuários. A posição privilegiada de prestígio e poder atribuído às variedades do centro interno (EUA, Reino Unido, Canadá, Austrália e Nova Zelândia) é assim questionada pelos respectivos autores. Rajagopalan acrescenta outra dimensão ao questionamento ao expor a postura racista e discriminatória subjacente às noções “falante nativo” e “falante não-nativo” (doravante, respectivamente NS e NNS). Rajagopalan tem escrito extensivamente sobre o tema de “natividade” ou “naturalidade”; ao longo dos anos, Schmitz também tem elaborado vários trabalhos sobre o mesmo assunto. Existem, no entanto, certas divergências entre os dois autores sobre o assunto em questão. A finalidade desta reflexão é interagir num debate respeitoso com o intuito de identificar uma leitura equivocada por parte de Schmitz. Ouvir um ao outro e aprender mutuamente são essenciais em todas as interações acadêmicas.

Palavras-chave: *falante nativo; falante não-nativo; nacionalismo; preconceito linguístico.*

My objective here is to debate with Kanavillil Rajagopalan, who has written extensively on the very complex native speaker and nonnative speaker issue (henceforth, respectively NS and NNS) in the field of World Englishes (Rajagopalan 1997, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2012). Over the years, I have also published articles on the same topic (Schmitz 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). This thematic number dedicated to the many accomplishment of Rajagopalan is an excellent opportunity to reexamine the thorny concept of nativity (nativeness vs. non-nativeness) with regard to English in a globalized world.

In the course of this essay, I present a reading that is my responsibility and it may be the case that he may not agree with me, in whole or in part, and not recognize himself in my reception of his thoughts. My remarks will no doubt serve as a way for me to listen, for he aptly states in his doctoral thesis that “in science, the last word is nobody’s monopoly” (Rajagopalan 1982:226).

1. Nativeness: myth or mystique?

Motivated by three seminal papers on the NS/NNS issue published in the *Journal of Pragmatics* (henceforth JP) – namely, Singh et al. (1995), Alfendras et al. (1995) and Singh (1995) –, Rajagopalan (1997: 229) concludes that the NS notion is discriminatory and, in his words, points to “a potentially dangerous ideological stance.” This is indeed the case and it is a very important contribution. Earlier on, Paikeday (1985:33) also points to discrimination underlying the NS notion with regard to employment of translators and teachers. He writes: “sometimes you begin to wonder, when people start recruiting ‘native speakers’ of English, for example, whether they don’t really mean “White Anglo-Saxon protestants”, Scots, maybe, but no Irish need apply.”

But the problem is that Rajagopalan tells us that “the native speaker is a piece of phantasmagoria that exists only in the dream-world of the theoretical linguist” (p. 228-229). Mey (1981:82), in contrast, observes that the “[N]ative speaker should be treated as a human, not as figment of some linguist’s imagination.”

In my view, the NS notion exists in the day-to-day lives of people who have suffered racial or ethnic prejudice. For example, the Kurdish people, the Basques and the Irish in their specific struggles for their own identities consider themselves NSs of their respective languages rather than Turks, Spaniards or English.

There is another side to the coin, the one that Rajagopalan rightly censures, where the NS notion along with nationalism and chauvinism are used by nation-states to construct national identities based on ethnic superiority, racial, and linguistic purity. One can recall the role of National Socialism in Nazi Germany (1939-1945) that attempted to do just that. Bonfiglio (2002) points out that standard American (English) was appropriated from mid-western English (spoken for the most part by white Americans of Northern European origin) and motivated by a discriminatory stance against the varieties of English spoken in New York and Boston and also by presence of immigrants in the Eastern part of the nation.

Rajagopalan (1997:226) contends that “nativity is scientifically respectable myth in so far as the Science of Language or Linguistics is concerned.” The problem for me is the word “myth.” In an article published much later (Rajagopalan 2012:42), he refers to *Language Myths* edited by Bauer and Trudgill (1998). Among the twenty-odd myths studied, Evans (1998:159-168) considers that the statement “aborigines speak primitive languages” is indeed a myth for linguistic research has shown that the native peoples of Australia speak highly complex languages, in some cases, even more complex than Indo-European tongues (Evans 1998:167). I am sure that Rajagopalan would agree. But as far as the NS notion, I do not view it as a myth; rather, I subscribe to Ferguson (1982:vii) who prefers the term “mystique” rather than myth. In my own case, as a learner of Spanish in the USA, I enjoyed having NS teachers from Spain and South America (even though some were not outstanding teachers); I identified with them for my object of desire was to visit the countries where they all came from. The word *mystique* for the *Macmillan English for Advanced Learners* (2007) is defined as “an attractive quality that someone has because they seem mysterious or special in an exciting way.” I contend that a myth is “something that people wrongly believe to be true” in one meaning and in another “an ancient traditional story about gods, heroes

and magic.” (*Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, p. 990). The well-known stories as the “Myth of Sisyphus” or “Wings of Icarus” hold valuable lessons that may apply to all humankind.

The NS notion is not a myth but it is indeed highly complex reality for there are different types of NSs. Schmitz (2009:345-346) proposes a working typology of the NS in order to clarify the different senses in which the term is employed by different researchers. The first meaning is the ‘age of acquisition natives’ who learned a specific language in their infancy and continue to use it through puberty and then on to adulthood. If I understand Singh (1995) correctly, he is claiming NS for some Indians while for Mohanan (Singh et al. 1995:286), some Singaporeans are early acquisitioners while others are learners. The second meaning of the “loyalty native” refers to a person who views Irish Gaelic as his or her native tongue, but has little proficiency or has forgotten it (almost) completely. The third meaning is the “objective proficiency native” who speaks a language with “confidence, consistency and automaticity” in different contexts. Priesler (Afendras et al. 1995:312) is a good example for he states that he shares “relatively stable well-formedness judgments and full replication with the general educated speakers of American English who acquired English as their first language.” But in spite of his proficiency, Priesler considers himself to be a NS of Danish and not English for he would never speak English to a fellow Dane unless there are speakers of English present. The fourth sense of the term is the “ideal native speaker” concept that is dear to generative linguistics where the NS may indeed be “a scientifically respectable myth” (Rajagopalan 1997:226). The fifth use of the NS notion is the “blood native” who bases his or her NS status on race, nationality or ethnicity. This use is a dangerous sense of the NS notion and is precisely the one that bothers Rajagopalan. Terms associated with “blood native” are “mother tongue,” “mother land,” if employed as instruments of power over “others” can lead to righteous slogans as “my country right or wrong.”

Rajagopalan (1997) considers the idea of “near native” to be enigmatic. When I look back at all the colleagues and former students of mine, I would indeed use “near-native” to refer to some of them, based on my evaluation (to be sure subjective, as all evaluations are) of their fluency, ability to debate, on one hand, and on their ability to

write papers in academic journals in English. For Sorace (2003) the concept of “near-nativeness” is complex and points to its study in the field of Second Language Acquisition.

2. Removing the NS from language study and the search for NNS

Rajagopalan (1997:227) considers that NSs “are an impossible species in the real world.” But Rajagopalan’s views have indeed changed (and this is laudable in the world of scholarship) for in (2004:105) he refers to a Brazilian Indian fluent in Portuguese who claims that he keeps his promises in his native language but not in Portuguese. Observe his use of the terms “native language” and “native speaker of Brazilian Portuguese”:

... he had made a fine art of promising in Portuguese with a straight face without having the remotest intention of living up to it – something that he hastened to add, he would not even dream of doing in his *own native language*. His Portuguese was absolutely fluent and indeed practically indistinguishable from that of any other *native speaker* of Brazilian Portuguese (Rajagopalan 2004:105, author’s emphases).

In another paper (Rajagopalan 2007:201), he appears to return to his former view for he states the following: “[A]mong those worn out concepts is that of the native speaker.” I agree with Rajagopalan that NS notion as far as English is concerned “has served the interests of the gigantic [English Language Teaching] ELT industry worldwide which is largely monopolized by a handful of people and agencies.” I think it is only fair to state that some of international publishers are moving away, to some extent at least, from their enthrallment with NSs in inner circle countries. English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth, ELF) offers an alternative for learners who do not want to emulate speakers in New York, London or Sydney (Schmitz 2012) can very well opt for ELF. A number of books dealing with ELF by Jenkins (2000, 2003, 2007) are distributed by major publishing houses that show a change in the mindset of that industry.

What I believe troubles Rajagopalan is the privileged status attributed to the inner circle varieties of English, particularly British and American Englishes that have served as a yardstick in detriment to other varieties. The inner circle varieties (British, American, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Englishes) are deemed NS varieties while Indian English, Nigerian English, and Singaporean English (among others) have been relegated to the status on NNS varieties – here lies the crux of the problem.

The three seminal articles cited above published in the JP that sparked off Rajagopalan's (1997) important paper need to be examined in more detail in order for us to come to grips with the NS/NNS issue. In the next part of this paper, I look at a number of the many arguments presented.

3. The JP papers

Confronting Rajagopalan's (1997:228) remarks that "[I]t is at all surprising that in the absence of viable and fool-proof criteria for identifying a native, the search for the non-native turns out to be another wild goose chase" with the views presented by Singh et al. (1995) about the notion of nativity, lead me to claim that writing off NSs and NNSs is not feasible. Singh (1995:283) criticizes the "two-way classification" of speakers of English in the world into NSs and NNSs amounts to "a wish to distribute equality unequally." The author presents three arguments (i-iii) against the division of English into two groups, "Old Native," on the one hand, and "New/Non-Native," on the other. Singh et al. (1995:287) make a claim for NS status for Indians, Nigerians and Singaporeans.

- (i) Claiming that British English is native while Indian English is not amounts to saying that speakers of Indian English are not native speakers of Nigerian English. In the author's words, an NS "is one who shares with others in the relevant speech community relatively stable well-formedness judgments on expressions used or unusable in the community..."
- (ii) American English and Australian English "can/do have their own internal standards, distinct from their historical home, while other Englishes (Indian, Nigerian) cannot/do not"

(iii) Bilingualism or bidialectalism on the part of speakers of British or Australian Englishes does not affect their NS status while bilingualism or bidialectalism of speakers of Singapore or Indian Englishes cancels out their being NSs of their respective varieties.

But still things are not that simple. Mohanan (Singh, et. al. 1995:286), while in agreement with the points raised in (i)-(iii), contends that what is important in the study of World Englishes is the order of acquisition of different languages by different users. This author points to a situation in the Indian context:

In Kerala, there is a community of bilingual speakers who use Malayalam as their first language and English as their second language; The major difference between the two bilingual systems is the order of acquisition.

Based on Mohanan's remarks, I surmise that there is a difference in proficiency between those who learned English early in life, say from 4 or 5 years of age, and those who came to the language later on life, either after puberty or in early or later adulthood. If I understand Singh correctly, the Indians who are early acquisitionists would be NSs while those "later comers" would be learners or NNSs with respect to English. Bonfiglio (personal communication, 2010a) disagrees with my defense (Schmitz, 2009: 345-346) of the NS notion and suggests the use of L1. Indeed L1 is not ideologically loaded as NS and NNS are. The fact that Singh (1995) and some of his colleagues argue for NS status of Indian English alongside British English may be a self-seeking one for not all Indians speak English; in Dasgupta's words many Indians are "marginalized in the fact that the majority of India's people are ignorant of her" (Phillipson 1995:257).

It is ironic that the more we try to remove the word "native" from the vocabulary of language studies, the more it appears. Paradis (1998:205) states that "properly speaking, one is not a native speaker of a language but of a given sociolect of a particular language." He goes on to claim that there are NSs of "upper-middle, lower class Irish English, Tennessee English or Bangalore English (among others)."

It seems that Rajagopalan (2008:211) does not agree with the attribution of NS status to speakers of Indian or Singaporean Englishes espoused by Aflendras, Coulmas, Dasgupta and Singh (Singh, 1995:324). In a review of Jenkins (2007), he states that Jenkins' consideration of outer circle speakers (India, Singapore) as NSs is "promoting their cause by giving them a shot in the arm" (p. 211) appears, in my understanding, to fly in the face of points (i)-(iii) presented above. Rajagopalan (2008:211) adds to his remarks to Jenkins that "many" of the outer circle speakers "cannot be described as *native speakers* of any language, let alone English". Note that I have italicized his use of NSs for it crops up again and that is the very term he has been objecting to in a number of his papers. He also claims that speakers of "World English" speak "a hotpotch of dialects and accents at different levels of nativization (or, contrariwise, fossilization)" (Rajagopalan, 2004:115). Kandiah (1998: 93) presents a different view about outer circle Englishes for in his view, they

... are equal of any other variety of the language, being not random hodge-podges of errors, mere deviations from the norms of the "mother" language, but visible, rule-governed systems in their own right which sustain and are sustained by speech communities of their own native users...

If the outer circles speakers are not NSs, then, I would think that we are forced to state that they are NNSs. Yet in Rajagopalan's initial paper on the NS/NNS issue (1997:228), he claims that the "search for the non-native too turns out to be another wild goose chase". But quite fortunately for English language teaching, he does indeed locate NNSs, and in another admirable about face, Rajagopalan (2005:283-304) contributes an important article to a book (Llurda, ed., 2005) in which he makes a plea for a "pedagogy of empowerment" to lessen the anxieties of Brazilian NNS teachers. It is indeed unfortunate that some NSs use a place of birth to project themselves as being the sole authorities on the language they speak; learners or NNs are deemed to be failed "natives" and second rate for not speaking the supposedly "pure" and "perfect" standard.

4. “English was forced down my throat”

In a response to a Brazilian student of English as a Foreign Language who asks Rajagopalan (2009:40) about what variety (American English, Received Pronunciation or International English) should be taught in Brazilian classrooms. Rajagopalan, in the course of his remarks, confesses that “English was rammed down his throat” from early infancy. Rajagopalan states that as a student in India, he was alphabetized in three different scripts, thereby preparing him as a multilingual person.

In my case, as a child, I had no choice in the matter. I heard English from infancy, but my “multilingualism” was limited as a child of five or six to hearing different languages when my father turned on the radio. Indeed a different situation! Rajagopalan’s remarks that he was forced to learn English, the language of the colonial masters, I fully understand, for my own Irish-born maternal grandmother manifested to me her displeasure about the presence of the English in Ireland, Britain’s first colony.

I would welcome from Rajagopalan a narrative on his part dealing with his multilingualism, multiculturalism (childhood, adolescence, early adulthood in India, graduate study in the United Kingdom, post-doctoral work in the USA, topped off by a long-time residence in Brazil). I wonder, however, if Rajagopalan would consider his being forced to learn English as a child the same as the use of the “Welsh not”¹ used as a punishment to children who dared to speak Welsh instead of English. We could also take the case of the prohibition of Catalan during the dictatorship in Spain or the obligatory study of Russian during the Soviet occupation of Hungary.

5. My own stand on the very thorny NS/NNS issue

In this part of my article, I want to set out my own voice for debate by Rajagopalan, possibly by the different authors cited as well

1. A piece of wood, to be worn around the neck of students with the letter “WN” was used in Welsh Schools to punish students who spoke Welsh or were overheard speaking Welsh. The practice was carried out in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and, in some cases, students were punished physically (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welsh_Not).

as colleagues and students. In my first reading of Rajagopalan's 1997 paper, I was puzzled; if NSs are "phantasmagorias", "worn out" or "moth-eaten" and if one can't find NNs, where do I stand? I am indeed grateful to him for his article put me on to the challenging set of papers published earlier in the JP. My interest in this very intriguing topic continued over the years and this essay is open for further debate.

I am not beholden to the NS notion. It is indeed a mark of privilege bestowed on inner circle varieties in detriment to outer circle speakers and also to expanding circle users of English who are viewed as being failed natives.

I support the use of term L1 rather than NS for the latter carries with it an aura of linguistic superiority vesting those who use NS with power. Bonfiglio (2010:218), in his deconstruction of the NS concept, states that to employ the designations "native speaker" and "native language" *unreflectively* (my emphasis) is to engage from the instant of first perception, in a gesture of othering that operates on an axis of empowerment and disempowerment." The author's word "unreflectively" points to the need for caution with the terms we use.

I agree with the main thrust of Singh et al. (1995), particularly Singh's contention (p. 294) to the effect that the division of English into nonnative varieties and native ones is politically motivated and not linguistic for there exists no structural or typological difference between Indian and Canadian Englishes as in the case between Portuguese (an Indo-European tongue) and Turkish (an Altaic language). Both Englishes are varieties of the *same* (my emphasis) language and both are native or nativized. I am fully aware that not all the participants of the three JP papers accept the view that speakers of Indian English or Singapore English are NSs of their respective varieties. Those who want to reserve the notion for speakers of inner circle varieties have different reasons. Earlier on, I cited Priesler who prefers being a NNS of English and a NS of Danish for pragmatic reasons because of the people with whom he has contact. Trudgill (Afendras et. al. 1995:316) denies NS status to Indian English or Nigerian English; he states that the adjective "native" applied to the different varieties of English in the world does not mean "better", "more suitable", "more correct" or

“more standard”. I wonder if it works that way in daily interactions of people. The problem is that those notions are in the mindset of some of the power brokers in the inner circle nations that take it for granted that British English or Canadian English are “better”, “purer”, “correct” while the NNSs are deemed to be distorted phonetically and flawed grammaticality. Prejudices are indeed difficult to remove.

I realize that my agreement with the argument in favor of NS status for Indian English put forth by Singh (1995) may very well place me in conflict with Bonfiglio (2010:218) who argues that “there is nothing intrinsically linguistic about the borderline of native language nationality; it is erected by psychological, social, political, historical, and cultural anxieties that have been projected on language.” Bonfiglio historicizes the construction of the NS notion and mother tongue ideology by nation-states in the European context that forged specific national identities and accompanying ideologies. The JP papers are different for we are dealing with many voices from East Asia and Africa (who have not adequately been heard in the West). The dialogue among the different scholars uncovers an anxiety on the part of those who work in the area of English studies in the world. English is no longer the private terrain of the inner circle nations; the language belongs to all those who speak it. To continue to treat inner circle varieties of English as privileged and to view outer circle ones as “being less equal” or “poor relations” (Singh et. al. 1995:285) can no longer prevail in the case of English, for as a world language it must be prepared to submit to “many kinds of use” in Chinua Achebe’s oft quoted words; and I would hasten to add to many different *users* in different contexts (my emphasis).

I have no crystal ball to view the future and attempting to speculate on what will happen in this ever-changing world is an impossible task. However, I would like to conjecture that attributing NS status to different varieties of English might contribute to removing inequalities and to reducing tensions among scholars in the South Asia and Africa with their colleagues in the West. The inner circle nations, for the most part, suffer from a monolingual mindset and, in some cases, from a xenophobic stance against the presence of immigrants along with a fear of cultural diversity. I have in mind the American historian Arthur Schlesinger (1992:19) whose remarks point to a biased view: “... new

laws eased immigration from South America, Asia and Africa and altered the composition of the American people.”

The outer circle nations are different for they are multilingual and multicultural and I cannot conceive of a counterpart of a Schlesinger in those countries. I do not think that the multilingual and multiethnic condition in India or Africa would ever permit those who view themselves as NSs in those areas to use nativity in the way it has been used historically in the UK and in the USA to “empower some and disempower others”, paraphrasing Bonfiglio (2010:218). It is unfortunate that the many people in the inner circle remain monolingual English speakers.

I await with interest Rajagopalan’s comments on my remarks as well as those of other readers.

Recebido em novembro de 2013
Aprovado em janeiro de 2015
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