

# Multilingual matters

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When a small portion of a language community starts to reinterpret the conventional meaning of words problems tend to occur. This is regularly brought home to me whenever we have occasion to hire staff. In the Victoria School we have combinations of English-speakers with little or no Spanish, Spanish-speakers with not too much English, people who speak both languages equally well (or badly), etc. Depending on the admin post we are recruiting for we run our advertisements using words like **'fluent'**, **'bilingual'** and **'native-speaker'**. When we advertise for teachers we do not make this distinction, as there is no evidence that native-speakers make better teachers, but that's for another article.

Now I know what I mean when we use these words and I know what the majority of educated people in my profession mean by them too. But something strange seems to have happened to them (the words, not the people) in Buenos Aires, judging by some of the candidates who ring or turn up for interview in response to these advertisements.

**'Bilingual'** in my dictionary means equally competent in two languages. Many people in Paraguay are functionally competent in Spanish and Guaraní; many people in Wales are equally at home in English or Welsh; in Finland a large percentage of the population speak Swedish and Finnish with equal ease; many people in Argentina speak Spanish and English without being noticeably "stronger" in one than the other. This last group consists mainly of people who through accident of birth have been brought up in an environment where both languages have been commonly used. Here in Argentina the trend has in many cases been for English to be spoken at home (and often socially) whereas Spanish has been spoken at school or work (and increasingly often socially too).

However, bilingual people are **not**, and never can be, people who have studied English as a foreign language. It doesn't matter if you have passed the University of Cambridge *First Certificate* or *Proficiency* examination; it doesn't matter whether you have finished the *traductorado* or the *profesorado de inglés*; you are not bilingual unless you have the spontaneity and intuition of a native speaker in both languages. In this respect it is significant that students sitting the Cambridge examinations have to affirm that they are not native-speakers, who are in fact prohibited from sitting the Cambridge exams because these are exams in English as a **foreign language**).

But **bilingual** as interpreted locally often seems to mean "I know a bit of English", and some candidates who have presented themselves for interview as native speakers have been quite offended when I have suggested that their English was not that of a native-speaker. Indeed, in terms of communicative ability, we have interviewed candidates responding to advertisements for bilingual positions whose spoken English was on a par with lower intermediate students in our own Institute.

The problem is much more serious when we come to consider the nature of the so-called **'bilingual schools'**. There has certainly been a tradition in Argentina of some very fine schools which were originally set up to cater for the needs of immigrant groups or local communities. Many of these developed among the British (or Anglo-Argentine as it has come to be known) community, and some of these schools were truly bilingual in so far as they taught British university matriculation board exams in the student's home language (English) while also covering (in Spanish) the requirements of the Argentine national curriculum.

Some of these schools still exist. Indeed, St George's College in Quilmes is still a Headmaster's Conference school and maintains close ties to the United Kingdom, even if the number of children who speak English at home is no longer what it once was. Things have changed considerably in recent years.

We also have the problem of just what is a **native-speaker**? Well, to quite a few people in Argentina apparently it is a person who knows enough English to handle everyday communication, sometimes not even that. But a native-speaker is surely something else. The language (or languages) that you learn as a child, often called your "mother tongue", has a range and depth that no amount of second language learning will ever replicate. In your native language you can write and respond to poetry; understand innuendoes and puns; read novels, advertisements, graffiti and cornflakes packets; understand television comedies, drama, cultural references and literary allusions; in short your control of the

language is complete. If it isn't, then you're not a native speaker. You may speak English very well, but you're not a native speaker.

Being a native speaker has nothing to do with forming grammatically correct sentences or having an extensive vocabulary. There are plenty of people in London who openly flout the rules of grammar and lexis with things like "You ain't never seen nothing like it", or "Don't them teachers learn you kids nothing then?" , but nobody could deny that these are native-speakers of English. Being a native speaker is a question of functional competence - do you function, within the limits of your social and educational peer group, as a person who is indistinguishably a member of that peer group or do you stand out as an outsider?

If something gives you away, a slightly off-key vowel, a strange construction, a intonational lilt or a rhythmic hesitancy, then you are detectable as not being a native speaker. Take the case of Henry Kissinger. There's little wrong with the **content** of what he says, in fact he's usually far more coherent than, say, ex-President George Bush, but his **accent** tells you after three syllables that you are not listening to a native speaker. You can't be a native speaker with an accent so thick you could make a bridge across the Atlantic with it, in fact you can't be a native speaker at all if real native speakers can listen to your voice and say "that's not a native speaker".

This does not, I hasten to add, imply there is anything "wrong" with the English of a non-native speaker. Unless he wants to work as a spy in an English-speaking country no learner of English should aspire to or even need to acquire native speaker ability. But there is a difference between being **fluent** and being a **native speaker**, which I feel in the best interests of honesty should be observed when applying for a job.

Returning to my starting point, I think perhaps one of the reasons that postulants for posts have the face to present themselves as 'native speakers' knowing full well that they are not is that they know that the person who conducts the interview is very often in no position to assess their level of English at all. And, to my mind worse, many posts which advertise for bilingual administrative staff don't even need bilingual staff, and the only reason for having bilingual staff seems to be 'status' as, once appointed, the person is often never required to use his or her English. This is not always the case of course, but according to people we have interviewed apparently not all that infrequent.