**Problematizing Language:**

**English as an International Language, the Native Speaker**

**and Deleuze’s Use of the Notion of *Becoming***

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**Abstract**

This article explores how one of the principles of mainstream linguistics, as critiqued by Deleuze & Guattari (1987), has complicated (and even countered) our work in international language teacher education. I do this first by briefly reviewing how some of the major figures in Western philosophy have debated the nature of language. Then Deleuze & Guattari’s critique of some of the tenets of modern linguistic theory is outlined. My discussion then turns to applied linguistics and the notion of the *native speaker*. This is concretized through a discussion of how this notion affected the design of a multi-year professional development project for English-as-a-Second / Foreign-Language (ESL / EFL) teachers from rural and remote areas in Western Chinese provinces. I conclude with reflections on how Deleuze’s use of the concept of *becoming* helps us understand the language teacher’s role as a “sorcerer” in this context.

***Keywords:*** *The nature of language; Deleuze and Guattari; international language teacher education; the “native speaker”; curriculum design*

**1 Introduction**

As is well known, the very discipline of linguistics got its start with Saussure’s (1906, 2001) notions of *langue* and *parole*, a distinction between the ways in which we concretely use language and its formal / abstract representation. As Lecercle (2005) argues, there has been a subsequent privileging of *langue* in an attempt to create a body of firm data on which to build the “science” of linguistics and the “principles” commonly espoused within applied linguistics.

One can go all the way back to the Greeks for this. In Plato’s Cratylus, for example, Socrates argues with Hermogenes as to the nature of naming. Socrates takes the position that a speaker should use words that express the essence of the object one is talking about. Nouns have exact correspondences to the ethereal forms of objects and must be used accurately and precisely. Hermogene, however, argues that words are constructed out of custom and convention and that these correspondences are general and changeable. Naturally, Plato has Socrates win that dialogue (Plato, Jowett [trans][1900]).

Thankfully, Socrates and his disciple Plato didn’t have the last word in this debate. In modern times, philosophers have attempted to interpret language as: imbued with power-relations (Foucault 1972) a form of objective logic (Frege,1892; Russell, 1905; early Wittgenstein, 1922), a set of *games* (late Wittgenstein (1997) or *acts* (Austin, 1955; Grice, 1971; Searle, 1969), something that *speaks us* (Heidegger,1959, 1971; Derrida, 1976), a biologically-inherited syntactical system (Chomsky, 1965), a functionally-determined set of choices (Halliday, 1973), a conduit primarily for the simple purpose of communication (Habermas,1984, 1981) or the very basis of thinking itself (Vygotsky, 1978).

This article does something a little different. It starts with the Deleuzian critique (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980,1987) of some of the basic tenets of mainstream (i.e. structural or transformational syntax-based) linguistics. This is followed by an examination of the notion of the *native speaker* and then an outline of how this notion was addressed concretely within a multi-year professional development project for English-as-a-Second / Foreign-Language (ESL / EFL) teachers from rural and remote areas in Western Chinese provinces. The article concludes with the argument that the magic of language can be productively viewed as a “problem” to be explored through an employment of Deleuze’s use of the notion of *becoming*.

**2 Deleuze and Guattari**

Deleuze was an influential French philosopher who wrote extensively on literature, film, and fine art. He died in 1995. Most notably in co-authorship with Felix Guatarri, he developed concepts derived from Spinoza, Nietzsche and Bergson into an orientation towards philosophy he called *transcendental empiricism* (Deleuze,1968,1994). Essentially, Deleuze argued that raw experience is not categorized (in the manner suggested by Kant (1787,1996). Rather, different experiences break down our preconceived abstract concepts of reality and make new ways of thinking possible.

Deleuze & Guattari (1987) criticized mainstream (i.e., structural or transformational syntax-based) linguistics. They argued that current linguistics has misrepresented language as being divorced from the serious consideration of a non-linguistic phenomenon. In other words, linguistics cannot realistically aspire to be a distinct scientifically-based discipline that examines a distinct phenomenon. Sentient human nature (and our use of language) is just too complex. The effort to “scientificize” linguistics has resulted in the discipline’s attempts at constructing a series of hierarchical functions based on what is conceived to be a largely unfettered transparent exchange of information. According to this orientation, the complexities of power relations, ideologies and politics have little bearing on linguistic phenomena. The disciplinary goal of linguistics is to conceive of language as an abstract and idealized system governed by sets of fixed rules that constitute standards. The supposed existence of the *native speaker* becomes part of bedrock of this mission.

As a result of these erroneous ideas, Deleuze argues, “linguistics has done a lot of harm” (1997; audio). In his orientation, language is *not* a hierarchically organized and standardized set of biologically-derived rules that constitute statements of fact. Instead, language should be viewed as indelibly connected to other phenomena that always means more than what the speaker intends. In that sense, it has a material force that is historical and without clear boundaries. Individual languages are sets and sub-systems in constant flux and contention subject to ideologies and politics. Language use is thus highly complex: partially organized and partially chaotic (Deleuze 1969, 1990).

This echoes Voloshinov’s (1986) argument that language is not as “inert system of self-identical norms. Instead, we find ourselves witnessing the ceaseless generation of language norms” (ibid.: 66).

**3 Consequences for Applied Linguistics**

Stern (1983) once observed that applied linguistics has not been greatly influenced by potential insights about concrete teaching and curricular methods from general education theory. The disciplines of psychology and (more recently) sociology have added much to the field. As is implied by the nomenclature, however, linguistics has long held dominance over applied linguistics. The varieties of language and the people who use them are problematic for an aspiring scientifically-based discipline that is intent on examining a distinct phenomenon. Davies (2007: 65), in fact, has called this continued neglect of the concrete aspects of teaching within the field evidence of “the dead hand of linguistics”.

The issue Stern expressed concerns about years ago has not gone away. On a keynote stage at a major North American conference the author of this article attended two years ago, one eminent scholar (who shall remain nameless) argued that scholarship within applied linguistics should now take teachers and teaching methodology more into account. It seems strange that concerns which have long been commonplace in general education now constitute a novel call in our field.

**4 English as an International Language**

The expansion and growth of English as an international language has increased the number of people around the world studying this language in different contexts and settings. This increment and interest in learning English has also increased the need to have instructors teach the language in foreign-language contexts. Due to a shortage of qualified English teachers and the need to improve the level of English in the public sector, governments are increasing their budgets in second language education through various initiatives such as participation in professional development courses abroad or visits by experts from western countries hired to teach local teachers in universities and schools in foreign countries (Danguo & Edwards 2014, Matear 2008, Zhou & Shang 2011).

In countries like China, English instruction has been dominated by a grammar form-focused pedagogy and the memorization of structures provided by the language teacher (Zhang & Li 2014). However, the Chinese government has recently launched a set of educational reforms designed to shift accepted models of pedagogy from traditional didactic and transmission approaches to those that are student-centered and based on critical thinking. In second language learning and teaching, the goal is to emphasize task-based project work (Danguo & Edwards 2013, Guo 2012).

In order to implement these new curricular innovations and to improve the standards of teaching and learning English, the China Scholarship Council sends teachers abroad for three months to take professional development courses in English speaking countries, such as Australia, the UK, New Zealand, and Canada (Danguo & Edwards 2014). Danguo & Edwards (2013) studied the impact of overseas training in the UK on the curriculum innovation and the teaching practices of a group of English teachers from Western China. Teachers reported the benefits of taking part in the course, such as awareness of the existence of new teaching methods, sharing what they learned with colleagues in their school contexts, and the implementation of activities that are more communicative in nature.

However, they also reported challenges at the moment of implementing curricular innovations as a result of taking professional development courses abroad. For instance, teachers experienced anxiety and uncertainty about how to implement what they had learned overseas in the face of established administrative structures and standardized testing.

The literature reports on the challenges of studying abroad but mainly from the point of view of Chinese graduate students rather than from the perspective of language teachers. Studying in a new country where a different language is spoken results in challenges experienced at different levels. For example, studies report on Chinese students experiencing language barrier and academic cultural shock after being exposed to different educational systems that are characterized by an interactive teaching approach and the expectation of students developing critical thinking skills (Li, Chen & Duanmu 2010 Liberman 1996, Lin 2006).

**5 The West China Project at the University of Ottawa**

In 2018, one hundred English as a Second / Foreign Language (ESL / EFL) teachers from rural and remote areas in two Western Chinese provinces took part in a three-month professional development project at the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa (Canada). The teachers worked on improving their communicative teaching practices and English language proficiency while living in Ottawa over the summer.

Teachers in rural China work under challenging conditions (Danguo & Edwards 2014, Matear 2008, Zhou & Shang 2011). They often contend with overcrowded classes and limited resources (especially in terms of information technology), centralized curricula content using Beijing-based texts that are often far from the daily experiences of their students and a tradition of teacher-centered grammar-based methodology that make it difficult to adopt critical and / or communicative approaches to language learning. The students often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds with imperfect access to educational resources and limited motivation to learn English, given the fact that most do not intend to enter university or make use of the second language in their adult lives.

In preparing for the project, the curriculum team led by the author decided to take a post-colonial approach that centered on critical lecture / workshop content and decentralized delivery. The overall curriculum was developed in concert with the Chinese Scholarship Council, Beijing Language and Culture University, and the Embassy of China in Ottawa. The project was delivered with the active participation of the university bilingual institute, one of the local school districts and a local First Nation.

In setting up the project, the team believed that it was important to operationalize theoretical constructs, such as the communicative approach to second language teaching, in relationship to local contexts. Drawing on Kachru (1990), Canagarajah (2012) and Pennycook (1998), our goal was to develop a program that was context sensitive and critical of the Western models of pedagogy that have often viewed the varieties of English used in the so-called third world as substandard. At the same time, the team wanted participants to feel that the course was relevant and useful to their realities back home. Therefore, we designed a project that was flexible and could be modified along the way following the suggestions the teachers gave us during the development of the course.

Exposure to critical content was crucial for the teachers’ understanding of the English language, its role in the development of language teaching, the development and adaptation of diverse models of teaching English and their own second language proficiency. Exposure happened at two levels:

1. critical development of English language teaching through in-class lectures on ESL / EFL theory and ELT methodology, group discussions and critical reflection of content, presentation and debriefing activities and
2. English language proficiency development through a task-based learning approach that included in-class group work, participation in communicative activities, and out-of-class tasks such as interviewing local Canadians and various information gap activities.

Exposure to different models of pedagogy and language development activities plus continuous critical reflection paved the way to complete the final assignment of the course. The teachers were asked to develop a lesson plan that would provide them with a road map to implement what they learned during the program in their classrooms in China.

The teachers were also asked to form groups based on the levels they taught in their communities (middle or high school) in order to select the units and content that they thought they wanted to teach in a more innovative way. This generated discussion at the level of methodology and at a language learning level. The teachers had to provide information about the context where the lesson plan was going to be implemented and the rationale for their selection of topic, language content and activities. In that way they could justify how the activities they learned were adapted to the language background of their students.

The teachers received two types of feedback. First, they were assigned an instructor from the team to revise their lesson plans and give them written feedback. Second, the instructors had one-on-one feedback sessions so that the teachers could write their final versions. Group work and interaction was present throughout the development and implementation of the lesson plan. With the group they formed in the planning stages of the assignment, the Chinese teachers presented their lesson plans and delivered model classroom activities. These presentations and activities were videotaped for the teachers to take back to China and present to their school communities. The teachers again received two types of feedback: written and oral feedback from their instructors and written feedback from their classmates. The teachers watched the videos that were later analyzed in groups.

Some of the main challenges encountered occurred at the beginning of the program. For example, the Chinese teachers were not used to working in groups or taking a critical stance. Their demonstrated respect for their professors and teachers made them reluctant to express their opinions freely. They also felt that their English was not good enough to communicate with their instructors or local people. Hence the activities that the university team developed focused on helping the teachers become more reflective and develop their communication skills that would help them feel more confident, principally in terms of their English language proficiency and their ability to effectively teach the language despite not being “native speakers.”

After obtaining ethical clearance from our university and informed consent from all one hundred participants, we collected data consisting of the project assignments, one-on-one and focus group interviews with sixty-nine teachers while they were in Canada and thirty after they had returned to their home provinces (the author and his colleague travelled to China for a month to gather this latter data). Although the preliminary findings look extremely positive, I hesitate to make reference to them until the full analysis has been completed. So, for this article I have confined my comments to how theory informed the design of the project.

**7 Deconstructing the Native Speaker**

In the project, we consciously decided to counter one of the central principles of mainstream linguistics: the *native speaker*. First coined by Leonard Bloomfield (1933), the notion became a fundamental aspect of Chomsky’s (1965) *transformational generative grammar*. Chomsky argued that the existence of this notion is evidenced by the rapid first language development in children. It is part of our species’ biological inheritance. However, as Cook (1997) and Firth & Wagner (1997) later argued with the support of Halliday’s (1973) *systemic functional* model of linguistics, that the notion of the “native speaker” has set up an impossible and monolingual ideal that represents most speakers of English as deficient.

Even though some scholars, such as Reves & Medgyes (1994), have argued that *native* and *non-native* both have their place in second language teaching, Nuzhat Amin (2000) clearly documented that non-native teachers of English (such as herself) have been usually viewed as inferior to those considered native. Phillipson (1992) went even further by attacking the very notion as a fallacy which has led to a hierarchy within the profession closely linked to the discourse that English is owned by those born and raised within the linguistic mainstream of Anglo-American contexts (Norton 1997 Widdowson 1994).

The native speaker fallacy, which I argue is still a pervasive notion in much of second language teaching, sets up a hierarchy in which the teachers such as those from West China are commonly subordinated (in terms of pay, status and working conditions). This notion encourages the use of highly paid foreign experts (who often have little training), standardized tests such as university entrance exams (the various forms of the Gaokao) and reinforces neo-colonialism through its privileging of so-called first world accents and dialects.

To counter this prevailing discourse, the West China project drew upon multilingual faculty to represent the diversity of the Canadian linguistic landscape: the majority were speakers of French, Spanish, and Farsi who taught and worked in English. Likewise, to counter the potential of a unidirectional dissemination of knowledge from (western) teacher to (peripheral) learner, curriculum was intentionally designed to be flexible enough to adapt to the unique professional and linguistic needs and goals of the Chinese teachers.

As was continually emphasized in the lecture content and workshop facilitation, the participants were encouraged to evaluate (the multiplicity of) dominant trends within current second language teaching theory and classroom practice so that they could determine for themselves the most useful approaches for their own teaching contexts.

**7 Conclusion: Making use of Deleuze and Guattari’s Approach**

As outlined above, Deleuze & Guattari argued that language is not a hierarchically organized and standardized set of biologically-derived rules that supports the concept of universal standards associated with the notion of the *native speaker*. They emphasized the productivity of language rather than abstract notions about staid structures. Key to this understanding is their use of the notion of *becoming*.

As argued elsewhere (Fleming 2019), for Deleuze & Guatarri (1980, 2004: 2) “becoming is an immanent concept in the sense that change and difference develops out of these states themselves and not from some transcendent essence or standard imposed from above” (p.2). *Becoming* thus “proposes novel ontological commitments that exceptionally accommodate dynamic complex phenomena” (Weinbaum 2011: 2), and is particularly useful for the exploration of something as complex as language.

May (2005) argues that becoming is a central concept within the Deleuzian oeuvre because it is explicitly set against *being* and *identity*, central notions within the tradition of western philosophy since the Greeks (whether it be the essential forms of Plato or the categories of Aristotle). Instead of putting the focus on a linear movement from one stable state to another, *becoming* emphasizes the instability of these states and, in addition, the unpredictability of the multiple movements between them (as opposed to the linearity found within how Kant’s dualism (1787, 1996) or Hegelian dialectics (Hegel, 1816, 1969)( as have commonly been interpreted). In Deleuzian nomenclature, these movements are *rhizomatic molar* and *molecular* *lines of flight* between spaces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980,1987). A state is continuality being deconstructed and reconstructed, or *deterritorialized* and *reterritorialized* into new forms of difference.

I argue that that the notion of *becoming* helps capture both the multiplicities of language and the teaching of language, which are far more complex (and interesting) than the dry attempt at science attempted in many studies in modern applied linguistics. What is more, viewing language as a problem (Lecercle 2005) opens up the possibility of conceptualising the role of second language teachers as sorcerers (Delpech-Ramey 2010) working through the magic of language.

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Biodata

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