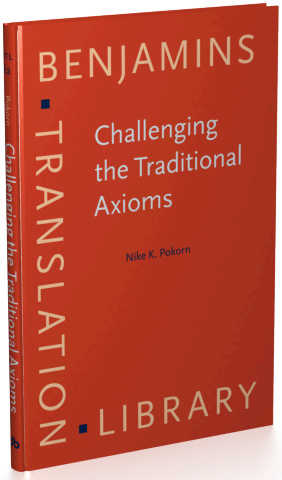
Open definitions of the terms “native speakers” and “mother tongue”

https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.62.02ope



Pages 1–23 of
Challenging the Traditional Axioms: Translation into a non-mother tongue
Nike K. Pokorn
[**Benjamins Translation Library**, 62] 2005. xii, 163 pp.

Open definitions of the terms "native speaker" and "mother tongue"

In order to approach the topic of translation into a non-mother tongue, it is first necessary to clarify the concepts of "mother tongue" and "native speaker", which are fundamental to such a discussion. At first sight, the concepts seem clear enough and sufficiently well-defined; however, a closer examination shows that their definitions are far from objective and water-tight. In fact, the linguistic competence and proficiency of the native speaker are hard, perhaps even impossible to define objectively. And although we all feel that we know who the native speakers and foreign speakers of a particular language are, and that it is not hard to tell them apart, it soon becomes obvious that neither linguistics nor real life provides us with a rigorous and conclusive test which would help us establish a clear distinction between them. Moreover, in some cases, although rare, foreign speakers come close to the group of native speakers of a particular language.

Since the meaning of the concepts of "mother tongue" and "native speaker" seem so unproblematic, it is not surprising then that numerous translation theorists and linguists take them for granted and use them as if their "definitions" had no gaps, no blurred and fuzzy edges. However, despite their pivotal position in both Translation Studies and linguistics, there is considerable variation in the connotations attributed to those terms, which seem to depend on the ideological position of the person providing the definition, or at least on the motives hidden behind his/her need to determine them.

Native speakers of the languages that are regarded as major or core because of the global distribution of power and wealth tend to safeguard their authority and prestige, and therefore rarely grant the status of native speakership to those who were not born into a language but who learned it later in life. When dealing with translations into English from minor or peripheral languages,[1] which are quite often carried out by immigrants, who were not born into the TL culture but who have, however, spent most of their lives within it, the question arises

as to whether these individuals should be considered native speakers of the new linguistic community or not.

The concept of "mother tongue"

There are differences in referential meaning and connotation attributed to the concept of "mother tongue". For example, the term can be simply understood literally to denote the language of one's mother, used in her everyday communication with her child. The term is based on the assumption that the child's first significant other is its mother. And indeed, in most cases it is the mother, biological or not, who provides most of the spoken input for the child, and therefore it is with her that the child wishes to exchange meanings. This definition becomes problematic when the child's carer is not its mother but its father, grandparents, foster parents or, indeed, a nanny who is not related to the child. In this sense, the child can have more than one mother tongue: in cases when the mother is bilingual, or if the role of mother is divided among more than one person, speaking different languages, the first linguistic input the child receives is bilingual or even multilingual.

Sometimes the term "mother tongue" is replaced by the term "first language" (e.g. see Crystal 1994: 368), which avoids inaccuracy when the mother is not the first carer of the child and denotes, in a similar way to the interpretation mentioned above, the language(s) the child learns first.

There are two more terms that are also sometimes used instead of the term "mother tongue": "dominant language" and "home language". The former denotes the language which becomes dominant in a particular environment or situation. And although in monolingual societies the child's mother tongue often remains its dominant language, in many multilingual or multidialectal societies this is not so. For example, members of the Slovene indigenous minority in Austrian Carinthia have their first linguistic input in Slovene, but then often shift to German in school and later on at work. Slovene is thus usually gradually relegated to childhood experience and German is used in all other situations. In this case, then, the Slovene language still remains dominant at home, while German assumes this role in other situations and environments. The term "home language" denotes the language a person uses at home when communicating with his/her family. This language can be completely different from (as in the case of Carinthian Slovenes who tend to use their own dialect) or the same as the public standard code of the language.

However, the general usage of the term "mother tongue" (i.e. the usage we are most interested in, because it has also been adopted in Translation Studies) denotes not only the language one learns from one's mother, but also the speaker's dominant and home language, i.e. not only the first language according to the time of acquisition, but the first with regard to its importance and the speaker's ability to master its linguistic and communicative aspects. For example, if a language school advertises that all its teachers are native speakers of English, we would most likely complain if we later learned that although the teachers do have some vague childhood memories of the time when they talked to their mothers in English, they, however, grew up in some non-English speaking country and are fluent in a second language only. Similarly, in translation theory, the claim that one should translate only into one's mother tongue, is in fact a claim that one should only translate into one's first and dominant language.

The vagueness of the term has led some researchers to claim (e.g. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas in Robert Phillipson 1989: 450–477; see also Phillipson 1992: 39) that different connotative meanings of the term "mother tongue" vary according to the intended usage of the word and that differences in understanding the term can have far-reaching and often political consequences. They argue that criteria for the definition of the concept depend on the hidden agenda of the one providing the definition and that they are thus likely to differ considerably and can even be contradictory. For example, these are some of the most common criteria and definitions found in linguistics:

Criterion	Definition
Origin	The language(s) one learned first.
Competence	The language(s) one knows best.
Function	The language(s) one uses most.
Identification	
– internal	The language(s) one identifies with.
– external	The language(s) of which one is identified as a native speaker by others.

Despite their extensive use, none of these criteria defines the concept of "mother tongue" objectively and completely; every definition necessarily reflects the original cultural, political and personal experience and expectations of the one providing the definition. And very often, these expectations vary considerably from those of the speakers defined and classified by such definitions. For example, the criterion of origin can be used to discriminate against

second generation immigrants, who would like to be granted the status of native speaker in their new linguistic community. Their second language is often the language they count in, dream in, write their diary in and use in conscious inner speech; however, if the first criterion of origin is applied, they are considered as native speakers of only the language their parents spoke, even if they can barely understand it.

The second criterion of competence and the third criterion of function could be used to discriminate against indigenous minorities. These definitions, which are often a result of political decisions, can be used to ignore the rights of and exclude all those who are by origin native speakers of a minority language in order to deny them the opportunity to use and develop their mother tongue (see Phillipson 1992: 39). The members of a linguistic minority are quite often more proficient in the language of the majority and also use the language of their environment more often. In fact, if we adopt these criteria in legislation, minority groups could be seen as gradually completely losing their mother tongue, since children in a foreign environment, watching TV programmes in the foreign language, attending school or day care where this foreign language is employed, use their mother tongue less often than the language of the new community and therefore have poor proficiency in their mother tongue.

The fourth criterion of identification, internal and external, probably most often creates tensions, especially in the case of the post-colonial independent development of the languages of colonisers: for example, native speakers of a peripheral English-speaking community, i.e. speakers of one variety of English developed in former British colonies (of the so-called new varieties of English or the World Englishes, e.g. Indian English) are often denied the status of native speakers of English by native speakers of a core variety or the metropolitan English variety (e.g. British native speakers). Here the native speaker question is accompanied by the question of the existence of various Englishes – is there only one English or are there more? Are other Englishes only corrupt versions of the "proper English"? Which English is an Indian English speaker a native speaker of? For some speakers, answers to these questions can be vital – a case has been recorded of an English-speaking Indian who considered himself a native speaker of English because this was the only language he used, but who was not accepted as a teacher at a language school in Great Britain on the grounds that he did not comply with the advertised criteria, in particular with the condition that all candidates should be English native speakers.

This last criterion, of identification, touches upon another controversial issue in linguistics, which was largely triggered by the emergence of more than one variant of English and French in colonial settings: i.e. a decision has to

be taken when a particular variety of the language is granted the status of a new language. Contemporary linguists approach the problem of the existence of different variants of English in different ways. The "traditional approach", embodied by Sir Randolph Quirk, distinguishes between native and non-native varieties of English. The latter including Indian English, Nigerian English, East African English, i.e. variants of English that developed during and after the period of the British Empire, but also Russian English, French English, Japanese English, etc., i.e. variants of English that developed in countries where English is used as an international link language. On the other hand, the native varieties cover American English, Australian English, New Zealand English, South African English, Yorkshire English etc. According to Quirk, only two of the native varieties are institutionalised: American English and British English, while there are one or two others with standards somewhat informally established, in particular Australian English (Quirk 1990: 6–7). Such a distinction led to the obvious conclusion that all native speakers of a non-native variety of English are not native speakers of English and are therefore denied any right to define the correctness or appropriateness of a particular expression in English.

The opposite view is represented by "liberation linguistics", which claims that languages or new varieties of English that developed in various peripheral English-speaking communities are new and independent languages, and should therefore not be governed by the norms of the core English-speaking communities (Kachru 1991: 3–13). Native speakers of those new varieties are therefore considered native speakers of English, i.e. of their variety of English, e.g. Indian English. The tension still persists when the core English-speaking community attempts to impose its norms on new varieties of English or when members of peripheral English-speaking communities represent themselves in core English-speaking communities as native speakers of English. And indeed, the question remains whether a native speaker of, for example Indian English, could also be used as an arbiter of acceptability in British English or American English (the role which is usually denied to them), and vice-versa, whether the native speakers of the core English-speaking countries can define the norm for the peripheral English-speaking communities (the role which is usually usurped by them). There is no doubt, however, as Davies reminds us (Davies 2003: 159), that the "traditional" attitude is similar to the attitude of British colonizers: the attitude that allowed the colonised "natives" to remain native, that accorded them large measures of local autonomy but which took for granted that it was never going to be possible for the colonised to become British.

To conclude, the definition of the term "mother tongue" depends on what those providing the definition and those defined by it want to achieve or express. All the criteria and definitions provided by linguists can be used to discriminate against one of the minority groups in the community. The concept "mother tongue" is thus not an objectively defined term which is unequivocally understood by users, and the issue is further complicated by the fact that according to the above-mentioned criteria (with the exception of the first criterion of origin), speakers can have more than one mother tongue and can even change it during their lifetime.

Defining the term "native speaker"

The concept "native speaker" has, like the term "mother tongue", more than one meaning.[2] It can be used to define a person who uses his/her mother tongue or first language, but also someone who uses his/her dominant or home language, sometimes all four at once, and sometimes only one of them. The concept of "native speaker" is defined according to different criteria, and in this case again, there is no objective definition of the concept which would cover all potential native speakers and not only the majority of them. Although there are many different definitions of a native speaker used in linguistics, all eventually turn out to be defective to a lesser or greater degree. Let us look at some of them:

1. *A native speaker of L1 is someone who has native-like intuitions by virtue of nativity.*

In this case, the status of L1 native speaker is given to those who were born in a family where L1 is spoken. The concept is defined in terms of mode of acquisition rather than of level of proficiency – which means that this criterion does not guarantee that native speakers are also proficient users of the language. Of course, in the majority of cases when the child is not only born in the country where L1 is spoken but also in a L1 family or community and lives in that community all his/her life, then the definition of origin is enough to guarantee the quality of the language used. However, the language competence and proficiency might be questionable when the child is born into a closed foreign-speaking minority group and may never achieve a native-like competence in the language of the majority. L1 proficiency might also not be attained when the child is born in the country where L1 is spoken but changes its domicile and moves to a foreign linguistic community, never using L1 again,

especially if its parents become bilingual and start using the language of the new community at home. The definition is problematic also if the child is born in a peripheral L1 country, because the core country might not grant such speakers the status of native speakership.

2. *A native speaker is someone who acquired L1 during childhood in an L1-speaking family or environment* (see e.g. Bussmann 1996:320).

In this case, the criterion of environment is added to the non-linguistic criterion of birth. Again, this "bio-developmental definition" (see Davies 1996:156) does not guarantee language proficiency. For example, children who, with their families, change linguistic community and become immersed in the new language where they completely "forget" or rather neglect their mother tongue and replace it with the language of the new community might never achieve native-like competence in their mother tongue. Their mother tongue is relegated to home situations, while the foreign language is used when communicating with peers in day care or school or at work. The definition is further complicated by the fact that, like the criterion of origin, it allows a speaker to have more than one mother tongue, and it is difficult to define the linguistic environment of children who come from linguistically-mixed marriages, and grow up using two languages. If one of the parents uses L1 and the other L2 and if the child moves from the country where L1 is spoken to L2 country is then the child a native speaker of L1, of L2 or both?

3. *A native speaker is someone who uses the language creatively*

Creativity is undoubtedly one of the signs of the proficient use of language. However, even non-native speakers can sometimes use their foreign language creatively, even at an elementary stage. Moreover, some non-natives achieve exceptional results in their foreign language: for example, Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov were never granted the status of English native speakers by the English-speaking community but their works were, nevertheless, accepted as classic works of English literature. Joseph Conrad is a particularly extraordinary case – English was his third language, after Polish and French. He was born in Poland, went to live in Marseilles at seventeen, and started English at twenty while a seaman on a Polish ship. But despite this extremely late start, he became one of the leading novelists writing in English; his command of the written language placed him in the front rank of English writers and he developed superb stylistic subtlety. On the other hand, he retained a very strong foreign accent, so that even his friends had difficulty understanding him. Ford Madox Ford, for example, claimed that: "speaking English, he had so strong

a French accent (sic!) that few who did not know him well could understand him at first" (Cook 1996: 111). Virginia Woolf added that Conrad was "a foreigner, talking broken English", H. G. Wells that "he spoke English strangely", and Bertrand Russell that "he spoke English with a very strong foreign accent" (Cook 1996: 111). It is obvious then that English native speakers did not accept him as a native speaker of English but they did, however, highly value his literary work and made him one the leading English authors of his time.

Vladimir Nabokov was also regarded by the English-speaking community as a foreigner but at the same time as one of its greatest authors. Nabokov was aware of the fact that his spoken English was considered substandard and therefore refused to lecture or be interviewed extemporaneously – he insisted on writing out every word beforehand with the help of dictionaries and grammars (see Pinker 1994: 291).

Not only English, also French native speakers seem to have accepted creative writings by selected foreigners. The Czech-born Milan Kundera, for example, who moved to France in his late forties, received in 2001 the Goncourt Prize for his novel *L'Immortalité,* written in French, which undoubtedly shows his acceptance by the French public. And last but not least, to mention a translator, André Lefevere, despite retaining a distinct accent in his English, nevertheless successfully published his theoretical works in that language, translated from French, Dutch, Latin and German, and managed, according to his American colleagues at the University of Texas, to maintain the style in all the languages he translated texts into (Faulkner 2000). This ability of foreigners to master written language and to attain this skill later in life is particularly interesting for our study, since it proves that a strong accent does not represent an impediment to the successful written transfer of a text.

4. *A native speaker is someone who has the capacity to produce fluent, spontaneous discourse in English and intuitively distinguishes between correct and incorrect forms of English* (see e.g. Crystal 1992: 50).

This definition, in which the mode of acquisition is judged less important than the level of proficiency attained, is most common in linguistics. In fact, even those scholars who try to avoid definitions as such and resort only to formulations of typical expectations they have of native speakers, such as Alan Davies in his *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics,* cannot avoid mentioning internalised rules of use and the automatic feeling that native speakers are supposed to possess:

> Let me say what I expect of the native speaker. I expect the native speaker to have internalised rules of use, the appropriate use of language, to know when to use what and how to speak to others. I expect control of strategies and of pragmatics, an automatic feeling for the connotations of words, for folk etymologies, for what is appropriate to various domains, for the import of a range of speech acts, in general for appropriate membership behaviour in him/herself and of implicit – and very rapid – detection of others as being or not being members. (Davies 1991: 94)

But linguistic proficiency, automatic feeling, spontaneity and intuition, so often used with the term "native speaker", are very hard to define and even harder to measure, especially because, as with creativity discussed above, a certain degree of spontaneity and intuition can be found even among beginners.

The definition regarding proficiency and competence also gives rise to a number of further questions concerning the abilities of the native speaker, for example: Is the "native speaker" also infallible, can s/he always intuitively distinguish between the correct and incorrect, acceptable and unacceptable forms in a particular language? Is the native speaker an omniscient arbiter who has access to the correct usage of the language, or not, and consequently is s/he the one who will undoubtedly create linguistically impeccable translations? In linguistics and in Translation Studies it sometimes seems that s/he can – the native speaker, most probably under the influence of transformational generative grammar, is often defined as the representative ideal speaker/listener of a linguistic community, someone who has the most reliable, even infallible, intuitions regarding the language and whose judgements about the way the language is used can therefore be trusted. If the native speaker is competent, which usually means educated, then s/he can be used not only as an authoritative source of judgements of grammaticality, but also as the model for grammar.

A possible grounding for the expectations qualifying the "native speaker" as one who has insight into a specified language or enjoys an intuitive sense of what is grammatical and ungrammatical in regard to its usage, as someone whose native instincts qualify him/her as a touchstone in linguistic matters relating to a language (see e. g. Paikeday 1985: 13) can indeed be found in Noam Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, where he states that:

> A grammar is ... descriptively adequate to the extent that it correctly describes the intrinsic competence of the idealised native speaker. The structural descriptions assigned to sentences by the grammar, the distinctions that it makes between well-formed and deviant, and so on, must, for descriptive adequacy,

> correspond to the linguistic intuition of the native speaker (whether or not he may be aware of this) in a substantial and significant class of crucial cases.
>
> (Chomsky 1965: 24)

This mythical description of an ideal native speaker, which could be deduced from Chomsky's theoretical position, has often been attacked as an idealisation which does not correspond to reality. But since the notion of "native speaker" seems to be one of the fundamental concepts in Chomsky's theoretical work, the Canadian lexicographer of Indian origin Thomas M. Paikeday decided to discuss this issue directly with the great linguist himself. In his reply, Chomsky associated the understanding of the concept "native speaker" with that of the concepts "language" and "dialect".

> So then what is a language and who is a native speaker? Answer, a language is a system of L-s, it is the steady state attained by the language organ. And everyone is a native speaker of the particular L-s that that person has "grown" in his/her mind/brain. In the real world, that is all there is to say.
>
> (Chomsky in Paikeday 1985: 58)

This interpretation of the concepts is profoundly consistent with Chomsky's general views, so that it is hard to argue against his position without calling into question quite a few tenets of those views. Chomsky's position is quite clear: he argues that every person is born with a genetically determined language faculty (L-0) or language organ. This faculty is identical across the species (if we ignore pathological cases), so that we can speak of the initial state L-0 of that organ which is common to humans but also unique to the human species, and it then undergoes changes and soon reaches a fairly steady state (L-s) which then remains essentially unchanged apart from minor modifications. The development of this faculty or organ, according to Chomsky, is almost entirely completed in childhood:

> In early childhood, the organ (the language faculty or the language organ) undergoes changes through experience and reaches a relatively stable steady state L-s, probably before puberty: afterwards, it normally undergoes only marginal changes, like adding vocabulary. (Chomsky in Paikeday 1985: 55)[3]

Chomsky makes a parallel between the concept of a "native speaker" and those of "language" and "dialects", arguing that the "language" and "dialects" do not exist as such, which means that they do not exist *in abstracto*; in the real world there are only various states of L-s attained by various individuals. Every individual is born with a language organ or faculty which could be developed to a defined, genetically determined steady state. This faculty, however, does not develop independently of the environment; the state attained does not

only depend on genetic endowment but also on experience, which defines the character of the steady state attained and the state to which the language organ or faculty will develop (ibid.: 56–57). However, everyday use of the terms demands a certain degree of simplification:

> (...) the scientific description is too precise to be useful for ordinary purposes, so we abstract from it and speak of "languages", "dialects", etc., when people are "close enough" in the steady states attained to be regarded as identical for practical purposes. (Chomsky in Paikeday 1985: 60)

Chomsky argues that at a particular level individual versions of language draw so closely together that they are considered identical. Groups of people who share similar states of language thus form linguistic communities. At that point Chomsky warns us that the ordinary usage of the terms "language" and "native speaker" often goes too far and becomes too abstract and complex, especially when the terms no longer denote only a particular linguistic community but also a particular state or nationality. People tend to uncritically transfer a particular general concept used for scientific purposes to everyday, concrete situations. And when the terms "language" and "native speaker" no longer mean only a particular tool used for communication or a person with a particular steady state attained, but also a symbol of social identification, those concepts, according to Chomsky, acquire ontological implications.

Despite Chomsky's insistence that every generalisation as well as too rigid concretisation are dangerous, we can find both of them in his *Syntactic Structures,* where he talks about an ideal native speaker with a stable steady state L-s ,who with his intuitive knowledge guarantees the acceptability of grammar, in particular English grammatical structures:

> One way to test the adequacy of a grammar proposed for L is to determine whether or not the sequences that it generates are actually grammatical, i.e. acceptable to a native speaker . . . (Chomsky 1957: 13)

If Chomsky insisted on the claim that every speaker is a native speaker of his/her particular steady state (L-s) attained by the language organ in his mind, then he should not call upon the native speaker as an arbiter on grammaticality for a particular linguistic community, in particular, an arbiter on the grammaticality of English. Moreover, would it be sensible to describe syntactic structures pertaining to the steady state attained by the language organ of one individual only? Indeed, in the above-quoted sentence Chomsky, it seems, is not talking about a concrete speaker but about an ideal native speaker who could be used as a touchstone for the grammaticality of phrases and sentences of the entire linguistic community and not only of his/her

individual language variety, i.e. for the normative English language and not for the speaker's idiosyncratic variant of it. Most probably he would argue that the steady state attained by the language organ of this particular speaker is "very close" to those of other speakers who form a linguistic community of English (despite the fact that he warns us against over-generalisations) – but we are still left with the unanswered question as to what the range of the criterion "close enough" covers and what deviations are still acceptable in order to consider a speaker a member of a particular linguistic community.

Chomsky is undoubtedly right when he claims, if we simplify his reply, that all people are native speakers of whatever they have learned, and that their particular variety of the language, however, is in many features similar to the varieties of other members of their linguistic community – this very similarity and compatibility of their individual variants enables successful communication, and communication is usually, after all, the aim of using a language. As far as the existence of different varieties of English is concerned, his answers can be understood to imply that, for example, an Indian speaker of English could be considered a native speaker of Indian English but also that all Indian speakers are not "close enough" to the steady states attained by the speakers of metropolitan English variety. But the crucial questions for our study still remain unanswered: which speakers are considered "close enough" and which are not? Is it possible that some speakers are left outside, and should not therefore be considered as competent and proficient enough, as arbiters on grammaticality of the linguistic community they were born into? Chomsky does not give an answer to that; he does, however, seem to imply that the status of native speakership should be given only to those who attained the steady state of the language organ before puberty, which means that this linguistic competence expected from native speakers, the ability to use the language correctly, cannot be acquired later in life.

Other theoreticians, on the other hand, raise doubts as to whether the element of origin, stressed by the term "native speaker", is indeed such an important factor for making a distinction between well-formed and deviant forms. Rampton (1990: 100), for example, argues that all speakers born in a particular linguistic community do not have highly developed knowledge of the language, even though this language might be the only one they use, and that therefore nationality and ethnicity are not the same as language ability, since they do not guarantee that the speaker is also competent in that particular language.

But even if we modify our understanding of the concept of "native speaker" and with Paikeday (1985: 40, 87) claim that a native speaker is a competent

speaker of a particular language who can use this language idiomatically– where idiomatically means "the usual way in which the words of a particular language are joined together to express thought" or "the syntactical, grammatical, or structural form peculiar to a language" (Paikeday 1985: 10) – and thus avoid the element of origin, there still remains the problem of distinction between competent and less-competent speakers of a particular language.

To test intuition is almost impossible – the nature of the subject by definition escapes every schematisation. But despite the difficulty of the task, there have been some attempts in the field of psycholinguistics to draw a line between native and non-native speakers of a particular language. Thus René Coppieters attempted to define the native/non-native distinction and to pinpoint these differences in intuitive choices between native speakers and near-native speakers of French. He carried out his experiment on 20 native speakers of French and 21 adult near-native speakers who had all acquired French as adults and had not used the language for normal communicative purposes before the age of 18. The near-native speakers all lived in France and had been using French for at least five years in everyday communication, while the mean residence level was 17 years. Coppieters chose only those subjects that were believed by French native speakers to be as linguistically and communicatively proficient in French as native speakers.

The questionnaire tested the distribution of the anaphoric uses of the third person pronouns *il/elle* and *ce* in predicative sentences; the subjects were asked to choose the right location for different adjectives according to the meaning of the sentence, they had to make tense and aspect distinctions (*passé composé* vs. *imparfait*), decide on the right preposition (*à* vs. *de* + *infinitive*), decide among different articles and use the correct form in complex syntactical structures. The results of the study showed that all near-native speakers had a greater need for an explicit context in order to derive the appropriate interpretation of a sentence and that none of the near-native speakers interviewed could be taken as having developed interpretative intuitions comparable to those of the native speakers of French (Coppieters 1987: 566–568).

Further research seems to suggest other areas of non-native "weaknesses"; e.g. some studies show that collocation errors and the absence of idiomatic phrasing are typical of the non-native speakers' writings. Late starters also do not seem to be able to achieve native competence in such subtle areas as culturally appropriate topic choice and other conversational strategies (see Long 1990: 273). The findings of the study by Georgette Ioup and her colleagues where an adult (Julie) was investigated who seemed to have acquired native proficiency in her foreign language (Egyptian Arabic) in an untutored setting

is particularly interesting for Translation Studies, since in assessing Julie's level of achievement Ioup also tested her translation abilities. Julie's results were compared to those of a proficient learner (Laura) of Egyptian Arabic with extensive formal instruction. Nor surprisingly, their grammar and morphology were flawless. However, once they both used a preposition wrongly, and Julie in one instance did not make the right word order distinction (see Ioup et al. 1994: 82–83). They both came very close to a native level of proficiency in perceptual abilities, production skills, and underlying linguistic competence; however, in the domain of discourse syntax and semantics they failed to reach native norms (Ioup et al. 1994: 91).

On the other hand, other studies have demonstrated that some L2 users are nevertheless indistinguishable from native speakers in syntax and even phonology (see Cook 1999: 191). Furthermore, Birdsong re-examined the Coppieters' experiment and contrary to Coppieter's findings concluded that ultimate attainment by non-natives can coincide with that of natives (Birdsong 1992: 739), of course, only in the case of "exceptional learners". Similarly Davies' replications of Ross' study (1979) and the Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) study show that both in grammaticality judgements and in pragmatic selections, in certain cases, individual non-native speakers are indistinguishable from native speakers (Davies 2003: 186–194). Those studies, however, document the achievements of a few exceptional learners who through education and training became native speakers of the target language (see Davies 2003: 192).

The majority of second language users/learners, however, never achieve that level in their target language. The empirical evidence show that in the majority of cases the speakers who move to a new linguistic community after puberty do not attain the same level of connectedness with the new language as native speakers, which would allow them to intuitively differentiate more appropriate forms from less appropriate ones. In other words, in general if speakers move to a new linguistic community in adulthood, it is already too late for them to develop native-like intuitions for the language.

But is it possible to develop native-like competence if a person moves to a new linguistic community before adulthood and when precisely is it too late? The vast majority of linguists think that it is possible and remain convinced that the length of residence and frequency of exposure to a foreign language, combined with the fact that a particular person came in contact with the foreign language *early* in his/her childhood, enables the speaker to develop an intuition comparable to that of a competent native speaker of that language. However, it is added, the person should move to the new linguistic

environment before the so-called critical period or sensitive periods decisive for language acquisition.

Which age is the optimum age for acquiring native-speaker competence in a language? When answering this question we touch upon another heated debate in applied linguistics: the discussion of whether the same fundamental process controls both the child's learning of a first language and the adult's learning of a foreign language (e.g. Dulay, Burt, & Krashen 1982: 200–229), or whether there are two processes involved. Traditionally, the latter is believed: i.e. that child language development and adult foreign language learning are in fact fundamentally different. Differences between two kinds of language learning, those of adults and those of children, are described with two different terms: language learning and language acquisition. The adults are supposed to *learn* the language, i.e. consciously learn explicit grammatical rules, while children are supposed to *acquire* the language, i.e. unconsciously internalise a knowledge of language by using the language naturally in communicative situations (Bley-Vroman 1990: 5; Yule 1985: 151). Unfortunately, conscious memorisation of grammar is held not to be the same thing as developing real language competence. Most probably because adults have the advantage (which becomes an impediment in this case) of having perfect knowledge of at least one language, their mother tongue, they approach a foreign-language differently to children – for them, it is an instance of general adult problem-solving, and they are less successful at this task (see also Cook 1999: 193).

On the other hand, this general lack of complete success with adult learners of foreign language is argued by some scholars to be a result of other factors and not of the fact that adults learn a foreign language differently than children. Krashen, for example, claims that adults, besides having the ability to learn, continue to use the same language-specific acquisition processes which allow children to develop their feel for the language (Krashen 1982: 10). He is convinced that the adult way of acquisition is in fact identical to that of children when they acquire their first language, as they both have access to the same language acquisition device:

> Some second language theorists have assumed that children acquire, while adults can only learn. The acquisition-learning hypothesis claims, however, that adults also acquire, that the ability to "pick up" languages does not disappear at puberty. This does not mean that adults will always be able to achieve native-like levels in a second language. It does mean that adults can access the same natural "language acquisition device" that children use.
>
> (Krashen 1982: 10)

Adults and children may use the same language faculty or organ when learning a language; the empirical evidence shows, however, that children, and only children, uniformly succeed in learning language (see e.g. Newport 1990: 27). And although adults and older beginners initially progress faster than those who start learning a foreign language in early childhood, they almost never achieve complete success, while younger learners tend to catch up with adults and eventually outstrip them (cf. Cook 1996: 112–113; Singleton 1992: 47; Long 1990: 260). Moreover, numerous linguists insist that those children who were born in the foreign country develop a full grammatical system in the second language and in that sense become indistinguishable from those who have had only one language input since birth (see e.g. Davies 1991: 64). That means that children of immigrants who were born in the foreign country become native speakers of the new linguistic community. The question remains as to what happens to the children who were born in the country of their parents and moved with them to a new linguistic community – do they also become native speakers of the new language? In other words: which age is crucial for language acquisition or when is it too late for a child to become a native speaker of a new linguistic community?

Children's first language acquisition is undoubtedly age-related; no one is born with a language, and the majority of people (putting aside pathology, injury, etc.) learn the basics of at least one language by age 3 or 4. Some linguists emphasise that towards the age of three there is a major grammatical advance, with the appearance of sentences containing more than one clause. However, the process of acquisition does not stop at that age; some recent studies have shown that the acquisition of several types of construction is still taking place as children approach the age of 11 or 12 (Crystal 1994: 245).

There appears to be one or more sensitive periods also for second language acquisition, with approximately the same lower and upper age bounds as those for first language development. Thus the ability to attain native-like phonological abilities in a second language begins to decline by age 6 in the majority of individuals and seems very hard to attain for those beginning later than age 12, no matter how motivated they might be or how much opportunity they might have. Native-like morphology and syntax seem to be possible for the majority of the speakers if they begin before age 15, and somewhere in between these ages for the remaining linguistic domains (see Long 1990: 274, 280).

It seems, then, that the optimum age for acquiring native speaker competence is before puberty. The majority of children relatively easy "pick up" language at that period and attain such a competence, provided that they are in constant contact with this language, or somehow "immersed" in it. On the

other hand, children who get in touch with a foreign language at puberty more often retain their foreign accent and very rarely achieve a level of proficiency comparable to that of native speakers.

An attempt was made in the mid-twentieth century to explain these differences in linguistic competence and proficiency with the process of lateralisation of the brain. Since it was found that with certain species (e.g. rats, goslings) there were periods, so-called critical periods, in which a particular kind of stimulus had to be present if the baby was to develop normal behaviour (Crystal 1994: 263), it has also been argued that there are critical periods in human maturation, in particular in the case of language acquisition. Thus in 1967, the American psycholinguist Eric H. Lenneberg (1921–1975) first hypothsised that there was a biologically-active period of language development, the so-called critical period, extending from infancy to perhaps puberty, when the child has to acquire its mother tongue. This period was considered so crucial because it was argued that up to adolescence lateralisation is not yet complete, i.e. the two hemispheres of the cerebral cortex have not yet acquired specialisation of function that characterises the adult brain – in particular, the left hemisphere has not yet specialised for language. Lenneberg was convinced that, in accordance with the findings of the neurophysiologist W. G. Penfield (Stern 1983: 326), at birth both hemispheres of the cerebral cortex were equally strong and not yet specialised, which means that lateralisation was not yet complete. He came to this conclusion by observing pre-pubertal children who had suffered brain damage in the speech area of the cerebral cortex through accidents, brain tumours, and surgical intervention, and found out that they recovered speech better than adolescents or adults by using the right hemisphere, which seems impossible after the puberty. Lenneberg therefore assumed that the brain's hemispheric specialisation for language is not achieved until about the time of puberty, which coincided with the ending of the critical period for language acquisition. The critical period is thus the period after which the child is no longer capable of naturally acquiring the language and thus also attaining the proficiency of the native speaker (see Krashen 1981: 72; Stern 1983: 362; Cook 1996: 108).

A number of other investigators have pursued Lenneberg's hypothesis – the most notable example was the study of the tragic case of a girl called Genie. Genie was born in a Los Angeles suburb where she spent thirteen years and a half in complete isolation, until she was discovered and rescued in 1970 from her psychotic father. Genie's father could not tolerate any noise and therefore tied his daughter to a chair in a room which was visited only by her mother, who brought her food. Genie grew up completely isolated from linguistic input

and all other normal societal and environmental stimulation. When she was later taught to speak, she developed abnormal linguistic competence (Curtiss 1977) and produced sentences like: "Mike paint. Applesauce buy store. Neal come happy; Neal not come sad. I like elephant eat peanut," (Pinker 1994: 292).

The case of Genie only partly supported Lenneberg's hypothesis: Genie did, despite her late start, nevertheless develop a certain language facility and communicated linguistically (although abnormally) with her environment. She used the right hemisphere for this task instead of the left one (Yule 1985: 133; Crystal 1994: 263), which provided evidence that the human brain is not completely specialised by the end of puberty and that the ability to acquire a language does not completely vanish after that period.

The assumption that age is an important factor in mother tongue acquisition was additionally strengthened by two other cases. The first case was the case of a girl called "Isabelle", who at the age of six and a half escaped with her mute and brain-damaged mother from her grandfather, who had kept them imprisoned in silent isolation. Although she was not able to talk when she escaped, a year and a half later she became extremely skilful in English in acquired between 1500 to 2000 words (Pinker 1994: 292). A different outcome has been reported for the second case, that of "Chelsea". Chelsea was a woman whose deafness was not recognised at birth, and thus grew up languageless to the age of 31, when her medical condition was diagnosed. But despite auditory amplification, Chelsea never achieved normal linguistic competence in any language (Curtiss 1988) and formed sentences as: "The small a the hat. Richard eat peppers hot. Orange Tim car in. Banana the eat," (Pinker 1994: 293). Isabelle was able to learn the language properly, while Chelsea was not, and this change in the level of success attained was attributed to the age difference of the two subjects.

The question still remains whether the reported cases were not too exceptional to be used as explanations of the usual course of development of language learning and language acquisition. For example, Genie did not only grow up languageless, she also lived in complete sensory deprivation and sustained considerable emotional scars during her confinement, she was brought up in conditions of inhuman neglect and extreme isolation, not only was she not talked to, she heard almost no sound and experienced no love and physical contact. She was severely disturbed and underdeveloped (cf. Crystal 1994: 263) and all these factors surely interfered with her ability to learn.

And indeed, Lenneberg's attempt to explain the critical period with a neurological mechanism has not been supported by subsequent work, and studies of healthy children in a normal environment contradicted many of

Lenneberg's conjectures. The neuropsychological evidence generally shows that laterilisation is established long before puberty, at the age of five, some studies even suggest that this may even be as early as the third year, while certain preconditions for lateralisation, like cerebral anatomical and functional asymmetries, are already present at birth (Krashen 1981:73–76).

On the other hand, it is obvious that it takes some years before lateralisation is firmly established and that the important cognitive and affective changes accelerating the development of the ability to learn a foreign language and, at the same time, decelerating the ability to acquire language, happen during puberty. Although some scholars argue that although after puberty children learn foreign languages with more difficulty and are less successful, this is not connected with the process of lateralisation of the brain or any other neurophysiological changes, and that the ability to acquire a language is never completely lost (Krashen 1981); it is also true that the period of the establishment of lateralisation overlaps with the main period of language acquisition – which means that the complexity of the possible relationship between lateralisation and language acquisition still needs to be resolved.

Thus contemporary linguistics offers conflicting views: some linguists are convinced that pre-pubescent children are in effect better language learners than adolescents and adults, others disagree and claim that adults are often superior to children in learning a foreign language (except in acquiring an acceptable accent) (Stern 1983:363) and argue that adolescents can achieve great success in foreign language learning (Yule 1985:151). A representative of the latter group is, for example, Robert Bley-Vroman, who argues:

> Teenagers, interestingly, often seem to achieve native-speaker competence. Indeed, some studies show that in the age range of 10 to 15, they not only reach native-speaker competence, but they also progress more rapidly and perform with greater accuracy in the early stages of learning than do their younger counterparts. (Bley-Vroman 1990:9)

Quite a few scholars (for a survey see Littlewood 1984:66–67, also Singleton 1992:47) provide evidence that more mature students are much more successful in language learning, in particular when learning grammar, but lag behind in phonetics:

> Indeed, the weight of evidence suggests that, given more or less equal opportunities, efficiency in second language learning increases with age, and that younger learners are superior only in acquiring pronunciation skills.
> (Littlewood 1984:66)

Some linguists therefore wanted to ascertain whether children, e.g. children of immigrants, are indeed more successful in acquiring a new language than their parents and whether there are any differences between those who start in their early childhood and those who start in their teens. For this purpose Elissa L. Newport (1990) and her colleagues designed a grammaticality judgement test which consisted of a list of simple English sentences, half of them containing some grammatical error and tested subjects whose first language was Chinese or Korean and who had spent at least 10 years in the United States. They wanted to examine whether the age of onset of acquisition is related to performance in the language, i.e. whether the maturational state affects the learning of the second language. The results supported the thesis that younger learners outstrip older ones. The immigrants who came to the U.S. as small children, between the ages of 3 and 7, achieved results in the test which were identical to those of American-born students. The immigrants who arrived between the ages of 8 and 15 did increasingly worse the later they arrived, and the quality of their performance declined in correlation with the age of their arrival – the older they were the worse they performed. Those who arrived between 17 and 39 did the worst of all, but the quality of their performance was unrelated to the age of their arrival in the U.S., and seems to have been the result of different individual capacities.

Similar results were provided by studies of immigrants to West Germany (see Littlewood 1984: 65) and confirmed the assumption that the younger the person is on arrival in the new country, the more proficient s/he is likely to become in the language. Moreover, linguists seem to have accepted the assumption that the children of immigrants who were born in a new country are at least bilingual if not native speakers of the language of the new linguistic community, which means that they are supposed to be equally competent in their new language as monolingual native speakers (see e.g. Eisenstein and Bodman 1986: 174).

On the other hand, in the 1990's some studies were conducted with exceptional learners where non-native speakers fell within the range of native speaker performance on a grammaticality judgement tasks (see Birdsong 1992) and were able to attain English pronunciation ratings within the same range as those attained by native speakers (see Bongaerts, Planken, & Schils 1995). The weight of evidence thus suggests that for the majority of the population the greatest success is achieved by the least mature learners, which is in contrast to most cognitive domains, where children are much less capable than adults. However, some exceptionally gifted individuals may acquire native-speaker competence also later in life.

The reasons for such a situation are numerous and linguists have identified only some of them: affective, input, cognitive, and neurological variables are usually used to explain the general decline in language learning ability. Unfortunately, they all appear insufficient in one way or another. Some scholars thus argue that affective, social and psychological factors such as attitude towards the new community, motivation, self-esteem, empathy, perceived social distance may impede second-language acquisition and stop input from reaching the brain areas responsible for language acquisition (e.g. Krashen 1982). In particular, the speaker's willingness to identify with the new linguistic group seems to be one of the crucial factors in determining the proficiency of a person in a foreign language – the need and wish to communicate may mark the success in mastering the new language. For example, an eight-year old child whose parents moved to a foreign country will most probably want and need to communicate with other children in order to survive in the new environment. If, on the other hand, the child is surrounded by other children of the minority group, where it can continue using its mother tongue, then the development of bilingualism will be slowed down (cf. Grosjean 1982: 193).

Others claim that input factors are more important; e.g. children usually have better learning conditions than older learners, they receive linguistically less complex input and have more time at their disposal, a greater communicative need and more varied opportunities to use the language. Children in schools also receive more focused attention from native speakers of the language, including other children, than their parents, they usually do not hold negative attitudes towards the new linguistic community, they have fewer inhibitions, are less embarrassed when they make mistakes, they have less fear of being rejected by the environment and usually do not analyse and apply conscious thought to learning the language, but let acquisition take its proper course (see Littlewood 1984: 66).

Some again suggest that cognitive factors are crucial, i.e. that decreasing adult language-learning ability is caused by increasing cognitive development. According to them child first-language development and second-language acquisition and adult second-language acquisition are different processes; children thus use the so-called language acquisition device or universal grammar while adults general problem-solving abilities.

And finally, the last group of linguists suggest that neurological or neurophysiological factors are the main cause of those differences, i.e. that the loss of neural plasticity which impedes successful second language acquisition is caused by lateralization, or that the plasticity loss is due to other cerebral changes like myelination, i.e. thickening of the band of white fibres that con-

nects the cerebral hemispheres, the so-called corpus callosum (see Long 1990). Some argue that bilinguals are not simply a mental combination of two monolinguals but represent a complex re-organisation of mental skills (see Bialystok 1998: 510) and that they should not be compared to monolingual native speakers at all. In fact, Cook claims that the only occasion on which L2 users can justifiably be measured against native speakers is when they are passing for natives, for example, when making translations to be read as native rather than non-native texts (Cook 1999: 196). However, although also the first results of magnetic resonance imaging seem to suggest that there exist different kinds of brain organization in early and late bilinguals (see Kim, Relking, Kyoung-Min, & Hirsch 1997), the notion that decreasing adult language-learning ability is exclusively neurologically-based and associated with absolute, well-defined chronological limits particular to language does not seem plausible (see Singleton 2001: 85).

To conclude, like the notion of "mother tongue", the concept "native speaker" remains vague and unclarified in linguistics. Almost all definitions of the term exclude marginal cases, e.g. they do not take into account immigrants, children of immigrants and speakers of peripheral varieties of a particular language, which seems to strengthen the claim that these definitions are often ethnocentric and political. In particular, the assumed intuitive capacity of every native speaker to distinguish between acceptable and deviant forms of a particular language proves problematic and questionable. Some speakers, despite the fact that they were born and grew up in a monoglot community of speakers of a particular language do not master the standard code of the language. On the other hand, other studies have demonstrated that a few exceptional foreign speakers can come close to, if not even merge with, the group of native speakers of a particular language. Although it is assumed that this is more common if the child moves to a new country in early childhood, linguists have no answer to the question of when the sensitive period for acquiring a particular language occurs, i.e. they do not know the exact age when a person should be exposed to a foreign language in order to attain a fluency and competence comparable to that of native speakers. Having a language as one's first language is a decided advantage in achieving competence in it; however, it seems that native speakership is often also a question of education, individual aptitude and extralinguistic factors.

But despite these limitations, numerous translation scholars took over these terms as objectively defined and thus avoided a more complex description what translators are really like. Those terms are taken for granted and are central to many theoretical writings. They underlie some of its most persistent

axiomatic truths – one of them being the conviction that that every translator should be a native speaker of the TL, i.e. that every translator should work only into his/her mother tongue in order to achieve acceptable results.