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**THE SPOKEN SELF:**

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF ACCENT AND IDENTITY**

A Dissertation in

Applied Linguistics

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the relationship between accent and identity in three Chinese graduate students attending a large research-one university in the northeastern United States. The study is based on Ochs's (1993) concept of identity as jointly constructed by the individual herself and the persons and conventions of her culture. It also examines the construct of the myth of native speaker superiority as it relates to the three study participants. Data points for this study include interviews, a questionnaire, extended self-recordings, and ethnographic observations and were collected over the course of approximately ten months. Data analysis is conducted using both grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as laid out by Fairclough (1989). Results include a case study of each individual as well as a cross-case analysis, in which the latent themes of intersubjectivity, social identity, and agency are examined. Conclusions reveal the way the myth of non-native speaker inferiority weaves through the lives of these participants and examines the very delicate balance they negotiate as they explore their own identities with respect to this myth. Finally, implications for classroom practice are discussed, and the use of CDA with second-language students is advocated.

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## PREFACE

This study began as an exploration, as the title suggests, into the intersection of accent and identity for second-language speakers of English, specifically Chinese graduate students who were training to teach science and/or mathematics classes to mostly first-language English-speaking undergraduates. These students were required by state mandate to take courses in improving their English pronunciation, fluency and overall comprehensibility, and this seemed to be fertile ground to see if their ideas about accent changed over the course of a year.

The precipitating event to this study begins, as many do, with an anecdote. A graduate course in phonology required the recording of a second-language English speaker and the subsequent analysis of the recorded speech for the influence of the speaker's first language on her or his English pronunciation. I chose a speaker whose English appeared heavily impacted by his first language—Spanish. When I approached him, he readily agreed, but made a point to note that he “can choose to sound more American than I do.” When I asked him why he chose not to speak in a way that reflected more first-language pronunciation, he explained that he “didn't feel Spanish” when he spoke that way. My fascination with this experience was two-fold: one, that a second-language speaker could choose to speak in a way that demonstrated a greater effect of his first language, and two, that his way of speaking made a significant impact on his view of his own identity. In all my well-intentioned teaching of American English pronunciation, I had never considered the possibility that a second-language English speaker would *not* want to sound like a first-language English speaker. Certainly many speakers of second or third languages found it a great compliment when they were mistaken for first-language speakers.

As with many social scientists, this event so captured my imagination that I sought to discover whether it would bear itself out in research. What connection was there between accent and identity? Certainly this connection would vary from person to person, but would there be themes that emerged, especially from individuals from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

And so, I set out with my ethnographer's tools: interviews, observations, remote long-term recordings, and even questionnaires. It was then that the beauty of qualitative research emerged: my study was not to be about accent at all, or at least accent was not to be the focal point. Accent became, as the collection of data progressed, merely a subject of conversation that allowed deeper and often unexpected themes to emerge. As I had surmised, the concept of identity was always present in the conversations I had with participants, but it was the myth of native speaker superiority that overshadowed every conversation. It is for this reason that I spend a great deal of time in my review of literature discussing the various conceptualizations of the native/non-native speaker dichotomy and their essentially flawed nature only to seemingly reverse course and use the terms liberally throughout this dissertation. I hope it will become clear why this seemed the most appropriate approach to my discussion and analysis of the data in the participants' own case studies and ultimately in the culminating cross-case analysis.

This study was a journey for me not only as a researcher but as a practitioner as well. I was able to use the techniques of social science to examine a phenomenon that touched my teaching work profoundly. While it is often considered an unspoken requirement that every dissertation end with an attempt to tie in to educational praxis, I do believe that this work can help inform

teachers of English to speakers of other languages. It does not lay out classroom exercises or suggest units of study for students, but it can give sometimes naïve and well-meaning English teachers a glimpse into their students' lives and experiences. Such snapshots can often inform one's teaching in ways that articles on teaching a particular grammatical concept or pronunciation skill cannot. It reminds us, as I was reminded in my conversation with my friend, that we all teach and learn under the pervasive cloud of the myth of native speaker superiority, despite our often different ways of dealing with this myth. Teachers can call out this "common sense" notion, not to magically dispel it, but to make it less transparent and easier to dissect. No less importantly, they can help their students see that while this myth persists, their ability to see it and name it for what it is can allow them to gain some agency over their own identities.

Most of all, though, this work can reveal the essential contribution of qualitative research to instructors as they themselves shift, adapt and nurture their own sense of themselves as teachers. Teaching based on research has weight, and it can help teachers feel confident as they often discover verification for notions they have held all along but for which they could not provide evidence. This work in a way is for them, as it is an answer to my green, earnest, novice-teacher self who came to not only understand her students better but also developed a reverent appreciation for the way research can change minds and, in so doing, change lives



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Dr. Celeste Kinginger has influenced me in profound ways. It was she who first opened my eyes to the issue of accent discrimination and introduced me to the value of qualitative research. She also complimented my writing often, and I hope she knows how those strokes were needed and appreciated. If this work is something she admires, it is because her thoughtful reflections and insights became an integral part of the writing process.

Dr. Meredith Doran has been a model for what I wanted to be as a scholar from the very first time I heard her speak during her job talk at Penn State. Her dynamism and energy, dizzying knowledge of the field and her passion for her work (and the work that we all do as applied linguists) have provided constant inspiration. It was in her course that I began to explore Critical Discourse Analysis and other methods of uncovering the often insidious ideologies encoded in texts and other forms of discourse, and this knowledge was invaluable in the creation of this study.

My graduate colleagues and dear friends at Penn State were vital resources as well. Erika Reutzel-Bechtel, Lisa Hundley and Kathleen Farrell-Whitworth were always willing to help me unravel a knotty problem, whatever its nature, and their support meant more to me than I can express. Jon Reinhardt provided support and encouragement as I languished in the writing process while he went on to live the dream of completing the dissertation and landing tenure-track work. Emily Rine's enthusiasm for the work we do helped me see the bigger picture. And my former partner and fellow scholar Jay Jordan showed me the way to get things done (and used his professor status to get me books and materials I needed while working at such a distance from the Penn State campus).

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pride in me and the work I was doing. My sister and her husband made me laugh when things were not going well and cheered me on when they were. And my nana's feistiness and refusal to quit when things were difficult for her made me see that I, comparatively, had it easy.

My life-beyond-graduate school friends and colleagues deserve thanks as well. Dr. Claudia Miner, my mentor at the nonprofit institute where I am employed, understood all too well the weight of a doctoral project and was accommodating and encouraging throughout the process. The Chairman of the Institute, Dr. Dustin Heuston, also gave me time to work and significant motivation to finish my degree. Dr. Haya Shamir, Kristianne Sandoval, Kelley Stiglmeier, McCall Izatt, and Isaac Troyo listened patiently as I blathered on about my dissertation and helped me contemplate the issues I was addressing in it.

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## CHAPTER I: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This section of the dissertation will examine important research on identity and the native speaker in order to lay out important concepts already established in the field. Examinations of seminal studies and more recent works on these topics come together to form a foundation upon which this research can rest. Once these foundations are established, the research questions are presented, and then literature describing and supporting the study design and data sources helps to lay out the structure of the investigation. This section also defends certain features of the study, such as the utility of multiple data sets, the self-selection of participants and the use of two analytical strategies.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study examines the way changes in an individual's L2 pronunciation are related to changes in her perception of her social identity. At this point, then, it is necessary to make clear that in this study, social identity is conceptualized not simply as a variable, but as a socially constructed process. Ochs (1993) offers this broad definition of social identity: "a cover term for a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life" (p. 288). She reminds us that an individual's social identity must be jointly constructed by others interacting with the individual; one cannot simply decide on a social identity and 'make it so;' she must have her social identity "ratified" by her interlocutors (p.290). In making this claim, Ochs draws on research in child development by Vygotsky (1986), among others, which has shown that an individual's social identity is first mediated by contact with her

initial caregivers who give certain meaning to various actions and stances. For instance, when a caregiver offers blocks for play, a child learns to recognize her blocks as objects to be played with and her hands (and not her mouth) as the objects that do the playing. Similarly, a caregiver's stance or affective reaction to certain objects helps to construct the way a child encounters those objects—thus if a child encounters a cat positively because her caregiver has responded to the cat with a great deal of positive affect, the caregiver is seen as having helped shape—or co-constructed—the child's response to the cat.

Ochs (1993) offers a compelling example of the way the meaning of a child's linguistic production is socially constructed. Drawing on her own language socialization research, she explains that the Samoan view of children as unruly and irreverent often leads Samoan women to interpret a child's first linguistic attempts as a kind of cursing, even when it is clear that the child does not even know that what she is producing is a viable linguistic referent, let alone one that indexes cursing. Ochs explains that “the child makes a sound, others ‘translate it’ into the act of cursing, and eventually the child becomes the cursor she or he is expected ‘by nature’ to be” (p. 294).

Thus an individual may be seen to make certain linguistic choices (not necessarily consciously) because of the way she believes her interlocutors will interpret these linguistic choices. In order for her to construct the social identity she desires for herself, she needs to choose the structures and linguistic practices that her community finds to be consistent with that identity. Pierce (1995) has enriched this discussion by pointing out that linguistic choices are mediated by the perceived social power with which certain ways of speaking are endowed. One might apply

Pierce's reconceptualization thus: in Och's example of the Samoan mothers and babies, for instance, the mothers' perceptions of children's speech are accorded a high level of social power in childrearing situations, and it is precisely because of the social power the mothers command in this situation that the nonsense words the children vocalize are perceived as swear words. Peirce (1995) is quick to point out that the power that certain individuals are given in certain situations is not absolute, however, because less powerful individuals can choose to resist being categorized negatively. In her research, for example, she cites instances where L2 user participants chose ways of speaking that allowed them to resist the way L1-community-normed interlocutors were attempting to silence or humiliate them.

The concept of one's second-language identity, then, can be even more difficult to pin down than one's identity in her first language. Bourdieu (1991) discusses identity as a process rather than a product, and Block (2007) points out that an understanding and acceptance of "ambivalence" is necessary in exploring the intersection of second-language learning and identity. This notion is especially crucial to consider when second-language speakers move into an environment dominated by their second language as their identities become "destabilised" and "they enter a point of struggle to reach a balance." They do, in short, arrive at a place of "feeling a part and feeling apart" (Block 2007, p. 804).

Mathews (2000) makes a comparison between the creating, adjusting, tweaking or altering of a second-language identity as the result of living in a second-language environment and shopping at a "global cultural supermarket" (p.1). This metaphor must, as Block (2007) notes, take into account that not all choices in the "supermarket" are available to all because of certain cultural

restrictions; simply put, one may not have the cultural capital to acquire a particular choice or even know certain selections exist.

Race, class, and gender are, of course, some of the “repeat offender” restrictions to a second-language speaker’s agency in selecting aspects of her or his identity. However, one major restriction that often trumps all of these categories is the myth of native speaker superiority, especially as it relates to accent. Accent itself is defined in a number of ways in the literature, but certain features which define “accent” are consistent across various sub-disciplines of linguistics. For sociolinguists such as Lippi-Green (1997), accent is defined as the effect a speaker’s first language has on the pronunciation of her second language. The participants in this study, in fact, use *pronunciation* and *accent* almost interchangeably throughout these data. More formally, Gabonton, Trofimovich & Magid (2005) explain that it is “pronunciation accuracy . . . as defined as the degree to which learners’ speech is free of segmental and suprasegmental features characteristic of their native language” (p. 492). Neurological studies of a rare syndrome called Foreign Accent Syndrome, in which sufferers of strokes or aneurysms appear to speak with a foreign accent, support this definition. Miller, Lowit & O’Sullivan (2006) have identified that it is “vowel, consonant [segmental] and stress pattern [suprasegmental] changes that emerge as significantly salient” in identifying someone as sounding “foreign” when she speaks her first language (p. 385). Accent itself, then, is defined as that which is *not* representative of native speaker use<sup>1</sup> of segmental and suprasegmental patterns and is in this way inherently intertwined with the myth of native speaker superiority, since it is native speakers whose linguistic intuitions trump those of non-native speakers. It seems necessary, then, that any examination of second-

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of there being a singular “native accent” is of course itself problematic and is further explored in the section on the monolinguality of the native speaker and in the section on “near-native” speakers as well.

language identity (and, by association, accent) examine the myth of native speaker superiority, specifically as it is encapsulated in the terms *native* and *non-native*.

### **The Native/Non-Native Speaker**

Because, as previously mentioned, the term *native speaker* is so pervasive in second language acquisition research in general and in the data in this study in particular, it is necessary to examine it more closely to uncover its genesis and pervasiveness as an organizing concept. The use of the term “native” or “non-native” speaker throughout this research may be troubling to some in the field of applied linguistics. A comprehensive look at the literature on native speakers presents a very mixed bag. Conceptualizations of the native speaker as defined by, variously, nativity, language proficiency, error-free language production, and monolingualism are all troubling in their own right. A summation of these different views seems necessary when one is defending one’s choice to use such a highly contested term (as well as its counterpart “non-native speaker”) because each view, whether defending the phrase “native speaker” or not points to the prevalence of the terms and the symbolic way they represent the dominant paradigm that elevates the native speaker as a superior user—and, in many ways, an *owner*—of a language. The myth of native speaker superiority dominates the analysis in this work, and thus the use of these terms must be fleshed out.

The concept of nativity is one that must be addressed in any examination of the native/non-native dichotomy. Cook (1999) claims that nativity is “the indisputable element” of a native speaker’s identity (p. 187). For many authors, such as Davies (1991), the ‘native’ element of native speaker is interpreted to mean that a speaker learns her language in childhood. Singh, D’souza,

Mohanan & Prabhu (1995) pinpoint the nativity cutoff at five years of age, whereas Afendras et al. (1995) put it between 8 and 14 years of age. Singh et al. (1995), and Cook (1999), however, both alter the definition slightly, stating that one can only be a native speaker of her first language or mother tongue.

For many other authors, definitions of native speakers that engage the concept of nativity—with or without the critical period—are insufficient. Afendras et al. (1995) and Kramsch (1998) both problematize the concept of childhood acquisition in particular by presenting similar cases of children who lose their first languages in late childhood and gain second languages only after the end of the critical period. Schmid (2004) further challenges the concept of nativity by examining data from German Jews who emigrated around the time of World War II. She notes that even among a group of native German speakers, degrees of language attrition can vary significantly. Participants in her study who emigrated at a slightly younger mean age (16.3 years) demonstrated less language loss than those whose mean age was nearly 19 years. Schmid (2004) posits that this difference in levels of attrition may be an effect not of age but of psychological factors, since the slightly older group emigrated very close to the beginning of the war, when anti-Semitic sentiments were fully entrenched in German society, whereas the slightly younger group emigrated between September 1933 and January 1935, before the Nuremberg race laws had been declared. Schmid (2004) suggests that the older immigrants had had time to see their fellow Germans commit acts of brutality so horrifying that they—consciously or subconsciously—began to distance themselves from non-Jewish Germans and, ultimately, the language itself, which contributed to their language attrition. In contrast, the first group to emigrate, despite living in an Anglophone country for over 60 years, showed very little attrition



in comparison, possibly because their memories of Germany and Germans were less negative. If psychological factors such as the ones Schmid puts forward can affect one's maintenance of a first language, it follows that such factors could play a far larger role than that of nativity in the acquisition of a second language.

### The Native Speaker as a Monolingual

Many researchers insist on the importance of conceptualizing a native speaker in terms of her monolingualism. For Cook (1999), for instance, this aspect is often assumed in mainstream linguistics research, and for Mack (1997) this quality is of great importance because of the way it allows psycholinguists and neurolinguists to operationalize linguistic attributes of participants. Mack defines a monolingual speaker in the usual way, as a person who speaks only one language, but it also appears, more importantly, that she regards a monolingual native speaker's linguistic system as somehow stable or, at least, protected from external forces that might change it. For instance, one claim she makes is that linguists would not be able to do work in comparative analysis without the "millions of monolingual native speakers who have experienced no (or minimal) contact with other languages" (p.122). But monolingual native speakers are not insulated from linguistic variation. Portuguese in São Paulo is not the same as Portuguese in Portugal or Angola, and the Portuguese used in a shop in São Paulo is different still from what is spoken in homes or in business offices.

Mack (1997) herself points out that one criticism of the monolingual native speaker construct is that these speakers are not identical to each other in their language use. Paradis (1997) points out that one isn't simply a native speaker of a language but rather, one can only be a native speaker

of a “sociolect of a particular dialect” (p. 203) and must be taught the difference between the ‘standard’ and her individual sociolect (Davies 1991).

### The Native Speaker as an Error-Free User

Situating the native as an error-free user is a hallmark of traditional Applied Linguistics research; from Pica’s 1994 review of research on negotiation in second language learning to a 2000 study by Mackey, Gass & McDonough on interactional feedback, L2 learners are consistently defined as those needing to modify their errors in pronunciation, grammar, or lexical choice to satisfy a native listener. Furthermore, the use of the term “target language” (Lyster & Ranta 1997; Mackey, Gass & McDonough 2000; Nicholas, Lightbown & Spada 2001) reveals much about the metaphors that dominate mainstream language teaching: a target is an arbitrary but fixed spot—nothing about a target can change, adapt, or shift.

These findings are of particular interest when examined in light of Bourdieu’s (1991) work on symbolic domination. Briefly described, symbolic domination takes place when an oppressed or lower-status group internalizes and replicates the norms of its oppressors, thus reproducing and perpetuating the oppression. In Koster & Koet’s (1993) study, in which experienced Dutch users of English (i.e., teachers) were the least tolerant of accent and found it most annoying, then, it can be argued that the Dutch teachers (the most experienced) had either extrapolated or been introduced to stereotypical native speaker judgments of accent and internalized these opinions as their own. Varonis and Gass (1985) situate this same symbolic domination in another way: non-native speakers in their study converse together without, as the authors say, the risk of losing face because their “shared incompetence in the domain of English” allows them to negotiate

meaning somewhat removed from the specter of the native speaker. In Varonis and Gass's view, since neither non-native speaker party is vested with the authority to name an error as such, neither will lose face if an error is produced (or perceived to be produced). The non-native speaking teachers in the study have accepted their lack of authority in deciding what aspects of, in this case, accent are 'acceptable,' but they still take on stylized versions of native speaker norms and reproduce these norms in their view of their students. It is this kind of reproduction of the native speaker myth that contributes significantly to the symbolic domination of non-native speakers, and this concept is critically examined in this research.

### Near-Native Speakers

Even terms such as "near-native" speakers are situated in the shadow of the native speaker, since they are viewed in terms of the native speaker behaviors they have or have not been able to appropriate yet (Kramsch 1998). For instance, the near-native speakers in Bongaerts, van Summeren, Planken & Schils (1997) and Moyer (1999) both produce verbal language which is rated for its native-like qualities by, of course, native speakers. This practice is problematic on many fronts. To start with, both studies take for granted that their native speaker judges will rate participants in the same way, and according to the same internal linguistic criteria. The study by Bongaerts et al. (1997), for example, attempts to make this claim; the authors state that all 13 of their native speaker raters "spoke standard British English without a regional accent" (p. 453). The entire premise of studies of near-native speakers is entrenched in the native-speaker-as-power-holder mindset, since it is still native speakers who decide whether to induct these near-native speakers into their community and accept them as "like" native speakers. These decisions, of course, are based on how closely a speaker

approximates the grammar of a native speaker. In addition, while it is possible that these native speakers have learned to approximate “non-accented” Standard British English, it is unlikely that this is their first dialect; as such, would one of these individual’s native dialects not vary at least somewhat in its internal linguistic criteria?

### Race and the Native Speaker

A number of researchers mention, at least anecdotally, the impact that race or ethnicity has on a person’s perceived status as a native speaker. Kandiah (1998), for instance, relates the appearance of an ad in the *Straits Times* newspaper which sought “native-speaking expatriate English teachers” for positions in a school but which was changed, days later, to “native-speaking *Caucasian* English teachers” (p.79, italics mine), presumably because native speakers who were nonwhite were considered not ‘native.’

There is also some empirical evidence to support the claim that a speaker’s race is a factor when her interlocutor is assessing language proficiency. Rubin (1992) found that when a group of 32 American undergraduate students listened to a lecture given by a Midwestern-American speaker who they believed to be Caucasian, they had few problems with comprehension and heard no accentedness in the speaker’s voice. However, when the same voice was matched with a picture of an Asian<sup>2</sup> woman, a group of 30 undergraduates showed poorer comprehension and claimed that the speaker spoke with an accent. The impact here of race on the native-non-native speaker distinction is clear.

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<sup>2</sup> Rubin (1992) explains at the beginning of his article that the “Asian” woman in his study is Chinese, but he refers to her throughout the rest of the text only as “Asian.” In doing so, he suggests (perhaps unintentionally) that while her nationality is Chinese, the mere fact that she is perceived as “foreign” was enough for participants to “hear” an accent.

A study by Amin (1997) suggests that race plays a part in the way ESL students view their non-Caucasian teachers as well. This qualitative study examines data from interviews with 5 non-White ESL teachers working in Canada who were asked to talk about their students' perceptions of minority ESL teachers versus their Caucasian counterparts. One disturbing theme that emerges from these data is that Canadian and native speaker identities are identified, in these students' minds, with Whiteness. Amin claims that students' resistance to non-White ESL teachers plays out in their lack of investment (to use Norton's (1995) term) in language learning.

In a study that examined 45 job ads for TESL/TEFL teachers in Korea, Choi (2001) found that a number of institutions showed a preference for 'native speaker' teachers, and four of these schools refused to take native speakers who were of Korean descent. The sites that would accept applications from Korean-Americans or Korean-Canadians often placed a number of restrictions on them: they must be born in the US or have emigrated at a young age, or, in some cases, they must be second-generation Korean-Americans or Korean-Canadians. These findings demonstrate the impact that race has in applying the native speaker label and demonstrates that the term does, in mainstream conceptualizations, index certain races or ethnic groups. Furthermore, they suggest that non-whites themselves participate in their own symbolic domination by reproducing the idea that race and nativity are intertwined.

### Alternative Conceptualizations

A number of writers have suggested alternatives to the native/non-native speaker dichotomy. Rampton (1990) and Leung, Harris & Rampton (1997), for instance, suggest the use of three new terms, "expertise", "affiliation", and "inheritance" to more accurately describe a

speaker's relationship to a language (Rampton, 1990, p. 97). Rampton argues that such terms are more accurate and also that they leave more room for negotiation than the traditional dichotomies. Expertise, for instance, is acquired, usually through schooling or close affiliation with a speech community rather than being a privilege of birth; it is also dependent on community norms, so that expertise in American English, for instance, may not mean much in an Indian English context. Most usefully, though, requirements for expertise can be "reviewed or disputed. There is," Rampton (1990) asserts, "a healthy tradition of challenging experts" (p. 99).

The attributes of language affiliation and inheritance are similarly problematized in that they are not seen as fixed categories but are flexible and "negotiated" (p. 99). In creating these new distinctions, Rampton captures the spirit here of what would constitute an ideal alternative conceptualization: the constant shifting of group memberships, the fluidity of identity in a multi-lingual world, and the lack of certainty in applying any label to a speaker. However, terms like expertise have implied 'counterpart' terms that can lead back to an ever-problematic dichotomy. *Expert*, for example, co-references *novice*, and the implied hierarchy—even though absent in Rampton's original paradigm—brings us back to a dichotomy of knowers and learners, and the power struggle inherent in the old dichotomy of native/non-native is resurrected. The implication here is not to suggest that this binary split is Rampton's intent in offering terms like *expertise* for consideration; he makes it clear that such a dichotomy has long since lost its utility. What seems clear, however, is that relying on words like *expert*, *affiliated* and *inherited* opens the door for counterpart terms and the power differentials they reference, and the spirit of problematizing and critiquing that Rampton intends these terms to convey is lost in stale dualisms not unlike the native/non-native binary hoped to be avoided in the first place.

No term, it seems, can be totally dissociated with a dichotomy. Even Cook's (1999) concept of the "multicompetent speaker," which appears to be a bit more suited to resisting easy dichotomization (because almost no one after all, is a truly 'monocompetent' speaker), is presented in contrast with a monolingual speaker (p. 185). So while the term multicompetent has the potential to present all learners as multi-faceted, it too may be subject to being reduced to a multi/mono competent binary.

Another label that has been considered promising starts with a definition of a speech community from Singh et al. (1997) as "a community that is operating a shared system as a social organ" (p. 289) because the idea of a shared system allows each member—no matter how 'expert'—to partake in the construction of the system. In this way, such a framework allows for the way a language is constantly altered by its speakers. Further, this definition views language as a construct that cannot be divorced from social implications. Viewing individuals as members of given speech communities, then, allows them to be seen in terms of their social desire to be a part of a group of speakers rather than by their level of linguistic or cultural competence in the language. Because communities are not seen as homogenous entities, the speech community framework can embrace concepts like Kramsch's (1998) idea of the "intercultural speaker," which views individuals as continuously engaged in multicultural interaction; even when a group's membership may appear homogenous (as groups of 'native speakers' often do), the intercultural speaker model situates speakers as players in a community who are always negotiating "various styles and language choices, and their respective cultural associations" (p. 28). However, this term is not only reducible into "member/non-member" dichotomies, but, as so

many alternative classifications are, is also somewhat clumsy and, frankly, a term that has only begun to curry favor and gain traction in the academic community. Second-language speakers “in the trenches” who discuss their linguistic situations every day do not as a population tend to use terms other than *native* and *non-native* to characterize users of language. It is for this reason that the idealized labels detailed here are, sadly, shelved in this dissertation in favor of the highly disfavored *native/non-native* terms.

Why, one might ask, with so much controversy and conflicting, slippery definitions, most of which display a clear power imbalance that is highly favorable to native speakers, would one choose to use such a highly contested term? It is precisely because of the symbolic domination implied in the use of the term that it is employed here. This research examines closely the reproduction of the myth of native speaker superiority in case studies of Chinese second-language speakers of English. Throughout the study, participants in this research negotiate their conceptualizations of and feelings towards the *native/non-native* terminology. The power relationship inherent in the term (clearly, being labeled as *not* something belies a lack of agency and influence) becomes no longer transparent to them, and they struggle with whether to accept their role as not native/monolingual/error-free, and to varying degrees, they each end up finding ways to subvert this characterization of themselves. Just as often, however, they fall back into playing out their familiar and even comfortable role as “non-native.” It is as if they recognize that while the Emperor may not have any clothes on, they also recognize that he is still the Emperor.



The use of these terms here is not to be confused with, say, the rhetorical move of some feminists to employ the term “bitch” in order to subvert its pejorative meaning in mainstream patriarchal or misogynistic culture, but rather it is to constantly remind the reader that while applied linguists struggle to come up with alternative characterizations for second-language speakers of English, the traditional terms still dominate in the minds of many of the people described as “non-native.” No new, more accurate and acceptable term will make a difference to the participants in my study until they learn to confront the myth of native speaker superiority, and this study documents their attempts to do so.

### **Research Questions**

As the preceding literature review suggests, the myth of native speaker superiority looms large over the lives of International Graduate Students. As such, these two questions emerge as the focus of this study:

- 1) What effect does the myth of native speaker superiority seem to have on the way international graduate students construct their identities?
- 2) What different strategies and tools do international graduate students employ in addressing the presence of this myth in their daily lives?

### **Methodology**

In a post-structuralist world, nothing is immutable: one’s identities, one’s sense of agency and the achievement of intersubjectivity are all relative and constantly shifting. Accent becomes a

site where these aspects of experience/contestation can be explored. An acceptance of what people say on the surface about accent, however, is just that—superficially useful. Talking about something allows people to put a specific face on themselves for the world, and while it is not as if there is some “hidden truth” behind their words, examining not only what things they reveal about larger issues (the ability of second language speakers to learn language, change their way of speaking, or gain ground with students, etc.) but the ways they *choose* to reveal their thoughts and opinions is also important and highly revealing.

It is for this reason that the methods of collecting and analyzing the data in this study are so central to its findings; the use of a qualitative approach, specifically one framed by longitudinal case studies, is a purposeful choice because of what this format can reveal about individuals’ experiences. In analyzing the data, the use of grounded theory allows the researcher to “let the data speak” without having to approach a data set with preconceived notions. In fact, the use of grounded theory (described later in more detail) has uncovered a number of concepts in the data examined here that were not part of the researcher’s expectations. The use of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1989) dovetails nicely with this approach, as it forces the analyst to provide linguistic “hard evidence” to substantiate findings uncovered by the grounded theory approach. In other words, much of what participants say allows themes to emerge, and a closer examination of the language they use to express these conclusions can expose the degree to which the speaker is committed to what she or he is saying and any grammatical or lexical choices that might suggest contradictory or conflicting emotions about the subject at hand.

## Qualitative Study Design

In their instructive text on research methods and design, Seliger & Shohamy (1989) discuss the various advantages and disadvantages of using a qualitative study design. They point out that such a design allows the researcher several advantages: if the research is heuristic, researchers need not approach their projects with *a priori* hypotheses but rather can use the process of collecting and analyzing data to discover themes and patterns which add to knowledge about how individuals (in this case) grapple with their concepts of accent and language learning in general. In addition, they may utilize numerous forms of data to enrich and bolster their claims and need not feel limited to one particular mode of operationalizing variables. One “disadvantage” of qualitative research is that it does not offer the statistical power to create generalizations; in other words, one of the participants in one of the case studies detailed here cannot be seen as a typical learner from whom generalities may be drawn. Even the strategy of analyzing themes across case studies, as is done in Chapter V, cannot suggest universal conditions and experiences for all language learners.

For this research, however, the potential revelatory results of qualitative research, and, in this case, longitudinal case studies, were too promising to pass up. While these participants cannot be seen as representative of all adult language learners living in their second-language environment (or even of Chinese graduate students in science and mathematics fields at the same university taking the same English courses), the common themes of their experiences reveal ideologies that certainly do persist in language teaching in general and offer insight as to how individuals might grapple with these ideologies as they travel their own “idiosyncratic pathways” towards developing and refining their second-language identities (Seliger & Shohamy 1989).

A longitudinal study design is indicated in most case studies, since changes in one's social identity follow a slow process that takes place only over a long period of time; thus the exploration of this aspect is also most appropriately addressed by a long-term research period—in this case, ten months. Spack (1997) is a model longitudinal study that investigates identity and second language development in relation to new literacy practices foreign students in the US are expected to adopt. In her examination of an L2 user's immersion in and acculturation to American-university-centric literacy practices, Spack uses interviews over a span of three years to give readers a window into the way the participant in her study struggles with language, cultural differences and new literacy experiences. Early on, the participant is quite concerned about her lack of what she calls “background” in American history and culture (p.18). Spack documents the way that this concern fades in importance as her schooling proceeds and the participant becomes more comfortable enacting her identity as a university student in an American context. The changes in this participant's view of herself developed gradually, however, and were only visible over extended periods of time. Spack (1997) insists, in fact, that the wholly different picture presented by her study calls into question the validity of data from “short term” kinds of studies (p.44).

Similarly, Pierce's (1995) observations about the dialogic nature of social identity and investment in language learning emerged only as she examined data that was collected over an extended (12-month) period of time. During the first six months of Peirce's (1995) study, participants in her study kept journals about their interactions with Anglophone Canadians and of their own impressions of their progress in acquiring English proficiency. The final six months of the study consisted of interviews which discussed these diary data and subsequent language

learning experiences, and this final phase was vital to the depth of findings in the study. Without this follow-up period, it is unclear as to whether Pierce would have had as robust a view of her participants' language learning experiences as she ultimately does.

## Data Sources

### *Interviews*

Interviews are the backbone of this study because they offer a venue for participants and the researcher to specifically explore the way a participant believes accent works in helping to construct her or his participant's identity. Interviews are also vital for uncovering the meanings participants associate with certain words or practices and the way they enact these practices in their lives. For example, it was during interviews that Piller (2002) discovered that her participants' interest in "passing" as a native speaker was important to their construction of their social identities and this concept eventually became the central theme in her written report of this research (p. 181). Interviews have been particularly important in helping researchers clarify and validate their conclusions about other data in studies like Pierce (1995), Rampton (1995, 1996) and Duff (2002), and the present study is no exception. As the underlying theme of the myth of native speaker superiority surfaced in early interviews and daily talk, later interviews allowed for the return to specific topics or events in order to more fully explain or verify conclusions about certain statements participants had made or interactions they had been part of. These re-visitations to events or statements helped reveal more nuanced conceptualizations.

Interviews with all participants were conducted in February, April, November and December of 2004. Questions were largely guided by the interviewee's preferences of topics, and as such, there were no set lists of questions pre-prepared. Interviews also served as

stimulated recall sessions in which the personal self-recordings participants had made were discussed and analyzed.

### *Questionnaire*

Because of travel and scheduling problems, participants were given a choice of doing an interview or completing a questionnaire that would substitute for the interview in July of 2004. These questionnaires were designed to get a sense of the participants' daily routine as well as the people and interactions that she felt most meaningful. They also included explicit questions about language and accent which served as fodder for later interview sessions. Yixuan and Shadow chose to complete the questionnaire, an example of which is included in the Appendix.

### *Ethnographic Observations*

Because the present study has focused not so much on the way others perceive an individual's accent, but on the way the individual herself believes her accent is perceived and the social identity with which she wishes it to be associated, an ethnographic study design was indicated. Most studies of second-language speakers' accents are perception studies that focus primarily on the various ways foreign accents are perceived by first-language speakers of the language. As such, these studies tend to look only at minute fragments of a speaker's talk that are intentionally removed from a social context. The dominant model, for instance, usually has the participant reading selected passages or sentences into an audio recording device so that only the her voice will be evaluated (Flege 1984, 1988; Flege & Fletcher 1992; Brown, Giles and Thakerar, 1985; Anderson-Hsieh, Johnson & Koehler 1992, Lindemann 2003). However, research that investigates changes in identity must take place *in situ*, as it were. Such a study needs to investigate language users when they are situated in a formal or educational context,

such as a classroom, but also needs to allow for factors outside the formal instructional context, such as in interactions with family, friends, colleagues/classmates and even strangers, because all of these individuals can be seen as playing a part in the way a participant constructs a social identity for herself.

Duff (2002) suggests that this kind of research would best be addressed by an ethnographic study design. In the conclusion to one of her own ethnographic investigations, for instance, she claims that

one point that requires further consideration in an ethnography of communication . . . is the extent to which students actually want to display their identities . . . or to conform to dominant, normative local sociolinguistic behaviors—that is, whether they consider those behaviors as signs of competence or incompetence, of strength or weakness—a community standard and ideology toward which they choose to become socialized or rather something they just endure, resist, or circumvent... (p. 313)

While the investigation Duff calls for lays out a more crisp dichotomy of resistance/conformity to dominant ideology than the present study offers, her words bring to the fore the important problem of attempting to observe students' changes in identity when such changes may be hidden or even something of which they are unaware. Thus the present study indicated an ethnographic study design, because this design helps to paint a holistic picture of a participant as a language user in many roles: spouse, parent, student, professional, friend and colleague, to name a few, and it is her participation in these roles that helps create the complex and often conflicting picture of her as an individual. It is possibly because of the various contradictions and

inconsistencies between participants' identities in various roles that this design proved even more vital in adding depth to the data and analysis here. Change, it must be noted, is not a one-way street leading to some ideal; it can follow a meandering path than may or may not be focused on one particular goal.

In her study of foreign language classroom practices, Anton (1996) adopts Hymes' ethnographic SPEAKING framework for studying social speech in its particular context of use. She argues that the richness of ethnographic data allows the researcher to explore "tacit rules of behavior that make a participant successful in the speech community" (p. 552). Further, she suggests that while ethnographic data are inherently messy and complicated, when ethnography is done well, it can provide a much more comprehensive and coherent account of classroom activities. Anton (1996) and Duff (2002) stress the importance of verifying conclusions with the participants themselves and in triangulation methods of analysis in order to enhance the validity of the investigation.

In keeping with an ethnographic approach, the participants in this study were observed in a number of settings: their laboratories, their ESL and non-ESL classes, their teaching assignments, and with families and/or friends in casual settings. Having the researcher formally observe these participants in several environments in which they played very different roles added a level of depth to the analysis, but it was the extended personal voice recordings that were the most fruitful in terms of revealing what a participant's day-to-day experiences were really like.



### *Extended Self-Recording*

In an attempt to obtain the fullest possible picture of a participants' various working/learning/living environments, it became clear that it was necessary to gather instances of participants' talk in ESL classrooms as well as other social situations such as in casual talk with classmates/colleagues, in non-ESL classes, in more intimate family/friendship interactions, and during routine or everyday activities such as shopping, service encounters, asking for/providing information, and so on. Since it was not possible (nor helpful) for the researcher to follow participants in order to capture these data, collection of these interactive encounters necessitated outfitting participants with a portable microphone and audio-recording device (mini hard drive recorder) and asking them to regularly (once a month, except for the summer months) record themselves for a specific, continuous 8-12 hour period. This method of recording helped to dampen, though not remove, backdraft from the "observer's paradox," in which the researcher's very presence changes the situation she is observing. While participants were told they could stop the recordings at any time, it was clear that most of the time, they forgot that they were wearing the recording device, and only once was the recording stopped by a participant to protect her privacy.

Participants conducted the following self-recording sessions, which ranged from 3-8 hours. The range varied so much because participants were allowed to turn off the recording at any time, especially for personal things they did not want recorded. Also, there were some significant technical difficulties with the recording devices (Jukebox hard drives), and this resulted in some data being unrecorded or missing sections. For instance, Shadow's list below shows only 4 personal recordings, as the one she did in September of 2004 was blank:

### Yixuan

- March 2, 2004
- April 2, 2004
- October 5, 2004
- November 4, 2004
- December 2, 2004

### John

- March 2, 2004
- April 4, 2004
- September 29, 2004
- October 27, 2004
- December 2, 2004

### Shadow

- March 1, 2004
- April 2, 2004
- \* Data missing for September 2004 due to hardware failure
- October 22, 2004
- December 2, 2004

These self-recordings turned out to play a very different role than the one they were originally intended to fulfill. Initially, they seemed to be a good source for measuring participants' actual changes in pronunciation, but the focus of the study soon shifted from the problematic task of

trying to distill actual changes in accent to the more productive exploration of the concept of accent itself and its meaning for these participants. At this point, these self-recordings morphed into serving the purposes of stimulated recall sessions similar to those in Johnson, Jordan & Poehner 2005. Briefly put, these self-recordings were played for a participant in order to elicit talk about what was happening and in an attempt to probe her reactions to the situation in question. Having participants actively engage in reflecting on their own spoken data ultimately proved more fruitful than trying to measure how much their accent “changed” since change was not usually evident. Engaging in dialogue about situations and interactions became a way to uncover latent ideologies, and thus these self-recordings ended up serving a very different (but no less revealing) purpose than originally planned.

### Transcription Conventions

The transcription conventions used in recreating participant talk from interviews and self-recordings has been adapted from the conventions adopted by the American Sociological Association. The symbols used here include:

- Full name of participant used the first time she/he speaks; first initial used thereafter to indicate talk turn
- “T” always indicates a talk turn on the part of the interviewer
- ALL CAPS are used for words that are emphasized with a higher volume
- ? Question mark indicates a marked rising intonation (not necessarily a question)
- , Comma indicates rising and falling intonation
- . Period indicates falling intonation
- *Italics* indicate words which will be discussed in analysis

- ^ Carrot indicates stress on the preceding syllable
- :: Colons indicate an extension of preceding sound
- (.) Period in parentheses indicates a pause of one second or less
- ... indicates a pause of 1-3 seconds
- (#) A number in parentheses indicates # of seconds in longer pauses
- (( )) Double parentheses indicate transcriber's comments, not transcribed talk
- Wha- Hyphen indicates an abrupt interruption of a word
- = Equal signs at the end of one talk turn and the beginning of another indicate that there is no pause between them
- [ ] Brackets indicate overlapping talk begins [ and ends ]
- xxx Multiple Xs indicate words that were not discernable enough to transcribe

### Participants

The three participants in this study self-selected to participate. Students in courses designed to improve second-language speakers' intelligibility before they began their jobs as teaching assistants instructing undergraduate students were approached about the study. It was explained that the study would take about a year's worth of interactions, and that these would include observations of students in their daily lives, interviews and day-long self-recording sessions at certain points during their participation. They were given a nominal fee for their participation.

The fact that students self-selected for this study was beneficial in many ways. One, their purposeful choice to join the study meant, obviously, that interviews, observation and recording sessions were acceptable to them. Selecting participants at random would have drastically

reduced the chance of gaining access to the areas of their lives necessary for data collection. Two, the participants' willingness to take part in the study suggested that they would be more likely to participate for the duration of the study than students selected at random. Finally, the fact that they self-selected meant, in at least two cases, that they had ulterior motives of their own that they wished to fulfill—in the case of these two participants, their desire to practice English meant that they were especially cooperative in going back over questions and data and discussing findings in depth.

The participants featured in this study are Shadow, John and Yixuan (all are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves). They have certain things in common; they are all Chinese nationals and graduate students in technical fields: respectively, mathematics, physics, and anatomy and physiology at a large R1 state university in the mid-Atlantic region of the US. But John is single, and Shadow and Yixuan are married. Yixuan has children; the other two participants do not. They are from different regions of China and different socioeconomic backgrounds. Their common traits are far fewer than their different ones, but it is specifically their roles as foreign nationals living and working in the environment of their second language that they come together as participants in this study. Each case study examines each participant in great detail but at the same time, the cross-case analysis in this study seeks out commonalities among the three participants.

### Data Analysis

Two main forms of analysis come together in this study, and they were intentionally chosen because of the way they complement each other. Grounded theory, and in particular the

constant comparative approach to it as described by Glaser & Strauss (1967) first reveals the organizing concepts that are most salient to each of the participants and then, in a cross-case analysis, examines the way certain themes extend across the data in all three case studies.

The linguistic structures and word choices participants use in these data are then scrutinized by using a critical discourse analytical method. This fine-grained analysis of forms demonstrates the way a participant's own talk—even that which is ostensibly not about the organizing concept in question—attests to the presence and persistence of the themes unveiled by grounded theory.

#### *Grounded Theory—The Constant Comparative Method*

The data analysis for this study is rooted in grounded theory, first put forward by Glaser & Strauss (1967). In essence, this theory allows the data to “speak.” In other words, it seeks themes that emerge from data rather than approaching it with preconceived understandings. This theory is especially important in this research, because there is such a large body of work that presupposes beliefs and understandings related to accent and identity. Much research assumes that native speakers' ways of talking are inherently “better,” and other studies reject this concept completely, and these two *a priori* suppositions dominate research that analyzes second language speakers' experiences. In a study like this one, then, there may be an expectation that international teaching assistants who initially labor under the notion that they are always deficient will suddenly come to a radical realization that their accent is a part of their identity to be embraced or at least accepted as a part of their second-language speaking selves. This assumption, while rooted in research done with non-native speakers, dictates conclusions not

necessarily borne out in the research presented here. Approaching research with such pre-defined polar categories make fine-grained analysis difficult if not impossible.

Grounded theory, however, makes it possible to set these interpretations aside and frees the researcher to allow the data to expose the understandings the participants themselves bring to the research instead of providing categories into which researchers must make data fit. The themes are put forward by the participants themselves rather than imposed on their discourse. It may be, of course, that much of the data do support these popular understandings, but entering into an analysis with these assumptions already in mind can preemptively shut out other more nuanced interpretations that may provide more unique (and likely unanticipated) results.

The manifestation of grounded theory is encapsulated by what Glaser & Strauss (1967) term the “constant comparative method” (p. 101). Their introduction of this method suggests a departure from traditional qualitative methodology, in which all data is first coded and then analyzed for patterns which might include repeating categories or characterizations or, as later research suggests, conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In the constant comparative method, researchers analyze their data *as* they code it, comparing incidences of interest with previous incidences in the same category to ensure that the categorizations are sound. Because grounded theory requires that themes and conclusions be drawn from the data, the constant comparative method is the most appropriate approach to this research. It was first proposed that the constant comparative method of analysis would be most useful in this study in examining ethnographic observation data and field notes, but it has proven most instrumental in the analysis of interview transcriptions as well.

The constant comparative method is, like many systems of qualitative analysis, often messy and unwieldy. It is not, however, haphazard or undisciplined. In fact, it is precisely because qualitative methods are often accused of being less rigorous and thus less conclusive than quantitative analyses that much attention must be given to obtaining the most credible and precise interpretations of data. To ensure this, Miles & Huberman (1994) suggest researchers write memos to themselves that document “little conceptual epiphanies” as they occur during data analysis (p. 74). These memos, they insist, are “one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hand” because they allow the researcher to document her initial conclusions ‘on-line’ and eventually designate robust categories of analysis (p. 72). They also suggest writing interim case summaries in order to step back from the more microscopic data analysis activities and see the larger picture as it is emerging. The academic year, which was the length of time designated for this study, is broken up into three 3-to-4 month periods (spring, summer and fall semesters) and the transitional periods between these blocks provided a perfect opportunity for writing interim case summaries as the next “season” would allow the researcher to return to participants and discuss findings along the way.

As a result of adopting this system of analysis, the organization of this research proceeds as follows: first, case studies are discussed and analyzed in terms of themes that emerge from participants’ talk, and then a cross-case analysis examines overarching themes that surface from among all three participants’ data. The patterns are validated and reified by the participants themselves as they engage in the analysis through an iterative dialogue with the researcher, but they are also supported by a rigorous critical discourse analysis as well. The fine-grained



analysis of linguistic patterns in participants' talk complements and enriches conclusions drawn via the constant comparative method.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis*

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an analytical method that maintains a certain air of controversy; often, researchers cannot agree on what CDA is or what it can do for a qualitative analysis. It is the very features that make it controversial that made CDA the best choice for the kind of fine-grained analysis necessary to support conclusions drawn with the constant comparative method.

In *Language and Power*, the work credited with definitively establishing CDA as a method of examining texts, Fairclough (1989) describes a robust scrutiny of linguistic forms that is used to uncover the ideologies behind any piece of talk or text. The definition of *ideology* espoused here follows Fowler (1996): it is the way one's beliefs lead her to categorize, value and describe certain objects or practices. Uncovering these beliefs is a vital task, because an individual's values and categorizations create, for her, the basis of understanding or "common sense" which provides a normative base for discourse" (Fowler, 1996, p. 11). These beliefs are often a reflection of prevailing community attitudes. Fairclough (1989) describes this notion of *common sense* as the practice by which a particular belief system or way of thinking about something tends to dominate other approaches to such an extent that it becomes so accepted and appropriated by that it becomes "*the way of conducting oneself*" (p. 91). Fairclough (1989) claims that one of the ways ideologies are passed on is when an interlocutor assumes that she shares certain values with her listener/reader. He explains further that when the listener/reader

interprets and internalizes these assumptions, she often unwittingly “reproduces them in the process!” (p. 85). It is the openly political focus on uncovering ideologies that has caused concern about CDA as a method; some researchers rely on methods they feel are devoid of political taint and are purely linguistic in nature. Practitioners of CDA, however, posit that no method or text can be divorced entirely from prevailing ideologies and that ignoring these influences is naïve.

Fairclough (1989) is quick to point out, however, that most common-sense and ideologically entrenched assumptions are tacit and only a careful analysis of the linguistic means these speakers employ can uncover these ideologies. Thus in laying out his model of CDA, Fairclough (1989) outlines specific discursive features that must be examined in order to reveal the latent ideologies in a text or speech segment. The first and most obvious is the vocabulary a speaker uses, because words are a powerful tool for characterizing, sanitizing or intensifying a categorization or interaction. The other feature Fairclough (1989) suggests analysts examine is the way grammatical choices (such as the use of pronouns and the passivity, modality, aspect or tense of verbs) affect the meaning of a piece of discourse. A number of compelling studies have either used CDA alone (Talbot, 1992; Clark 1992; and Kress, 1996) or combined an analysis of discourse with other methods to help enrich and triangulate the analysis. The myth of native speaker superiority is, as mentioned, the single most dominant “common-sense” way of thinking revealed in the analyses of the various instances of discourse in this study, and this observation was carefully uncovered and made opaque not just by what participants said but how they said it. The forms they used to describe themselves and their situations revealed, in some ways, as much or more than the individual words they chose about the degree to which ideologies that devalue

the non-native speaker dominated their thinking. It is necessary, then, to examine lexical choice and linguistic forms in tandem to gain a better picture of a participant's beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

The starting points of identity and the dominant ideology of native speaker superiority have become the points of origin in this study for examining the way second-language graduate students working at a large, research-one university negotiate who they are. This research plants itself firmly on the idea, as outlined in the review of research, that identity is an ever-morphing process of negotiation between an individual's beliefs and thoughts about herself and the way she is viewed through the lens of the "common-sense" ideas that pervade her second-language culture.

The various interviews, observations and recordings in this study are used to help document the struggle of an individual to better understand the culture that surrounds her and the impact this culture's view of her has on her sense of self. These data must be collected in a way that best preserves a sense of authenticity for the individual. At certain points in the study, when participants record or are recorded in various interactions and then are brought back to interview settings to explain the events that transpired, they discuss how these events and their thoughts about them transformed some aspect of their view of themselves. The analysis, then, is a dialogic endeavor: the participants have some experience or encounter; they discuss it with the researcher; the researcher conducts a more fine-grained linguistic analysis and draws conclusions to share with the participant, and these conclusions are dissected, revised and refined by the two.

The goal of this cycle of analysis is not to arrive at conclusions that are merely “valid,” but more to create understandings that *resonate* for both parties.

The following three chapters examine Yixuan, John and Shadow as individual case studies. The fourth chapter identifies and more deeply explores the themes of intersubjectivity, social identity and agency that are consistent across the three individuals’ case studies. The final chapter addresses the importance of this kind of research, its limitations and its implications for praxis. It also suggests directions for future research that can expand on the findings presented here.

## CHAPTER II: YIXUAN'S CASE

### **Background and Introduction**

Yixuan is a Chinese woman in her late 20s who came to the US when her husband accepted a post-doctoral appointment at a large mid-Atlantic university. Yixuan was pregnant when she arrived in the US in December of 2001 and her daughter Leyla was born in February of 2002. Yixuan entered her Master's program in August of 2002 and her mother came to the US to care for Leyla for a year. When her mother returned to China in February of 2003, Yixuan's mother-in-law came to care for Leyla for a year and was preparing to return to China when this study began. At the time of the study, Yixuan was pursuing her degree in Biology with a focus on neuroscience and had been in this program for approximately 18 months. Yixuan and her husband were engaged in their respective jobs doing research for the Biology department, as well as in finding affordable and convenient child care for their daughter.

Yixuan's data reveal a number of intriguing impressions. One of the most striking observations is Yixuan's confidence in her English-speaking abilities: she believes herself to be largely intelligible and this belief is ratified by her husband, advisor and in her general everyday interactions. The only area in which she doubts her English abilities is in the classroom.

### **External Appraisal**

Yixuan's feelings about her own proficiency with English are somewhat fluid; on one hand, she appears to have a level of confidence in her English-speaking abilities that the other two individuals described in this project do not have, at least initially. For instance, Yixuan

generally regards herself to be the better speaker of English in her marriage, and she also believes that both she and her husband consider her language abilities to be the more proficient and fluent of the two of them. She describes a visit to the doctor's office in which she had to contest some charges for medical services, and explains that "*after* it was finished, my husband think *oh* your English is quite good" because "I have to *speak to them clearly* to-to-to make them understand my, my issue" (Interview 1, February 2004). What is interesting is that Yixuan views this conversation as successful because she believes she was able to "speak to them clearly" (and this opinion is ratified by her husband's comment as well), even though she did not actually accomplish the practical task (getting her money refunded) she set out to do. In addition, it seems that this ratification from her husband is somewhat spontaneous and possibly surprising; he only makes the statement "after" the interchange was completed, and he begins his compliment with "oh," a discourse marker which Fuller (2003) describes as a signal that the speaker is either encountering new information (and even expressing surprise at this new information) or negotiating his orientation to old information.

There are native speakers in Yixuan's work and academic community who also help her feel confident in her ability to speak English intelligibly. For instance, she believes that one of the main reasons her advisor decided he "want me to be a student of him" was "just because I was speaking in our interview, and he feel very satisfied with it" (Interview 1, February 2004). While it appears from the syntax of the sentence that "it" could refer either to her speaking ability or the conversation itself, both interpretations, when coupled with the word "satisfied" suggest that her advisor is at least concerned about her ability and willingness to use English and finds her command of English to meet the standards to which he holds his students. She uses the word

“just” in perhaps an unexpected way—it seems that “only” could substitute for it, and this suggests that not only was her facility with English important to her advisor but *was the sole reason* her advisor chose her in the first place. In addition, Yixuan explains that the advisor has instituted a policy in the lab which dictates that *only* English can be spoken there, and the fact that such a policy exists appears to compound the importance her advisor places on her willingness and ability to speak English he deems comprehensible.

Yixuan also feels externally verified by much of the larger English-speaking community. In a questionnaire midway through the study, she explains that “*I think most* Americans think my accent *understandable* in *most* cases,” which, while qualified with “I think,” does suggest that she feels competent, at least in terms of pronunciation, the majority of the time (“most”) when interacting with Americans. It is true that she immediately qualifies this statement of confidence by explaining that “my *problem* in speaking English is mainly on too much mistake in grammar and *stress*” (Questionnaire, July 2004). And while most scholars agree that “stress” is a large part of “accent” (Lippi-Green 1997), Yixuan seems to be saying that because she is “understandable,” these concerns are secondary to her overall intelligibility.

Another reason Yixuan may appear to accept the idea so readily that Americans do, in fact, understand her is because it seems she does not believe they place much stock in accent anyway. She explains further why she focuses so much on comprehensibility later in the same questionnaire from the summer of 2004: “Most Americans *don’t care* the accent when they talk to me. They *care about if they can understand me*. They *try to understand me* instead of *focusing on my accent*” (Questionnaire, July 2004). She uses some interesting word and grammatical

choices here. She employs the verb phrase “to care about” twice (if one assumes her omission of “about” in the first sentence is an oversight) to parse out what she believes concerns Americans (comprehensibility) and what does not (accent). Her use of the word “try” implies that Americans are not always successful in understanding her (since “they try to understand me” leaves more room for doubt than simply saying “they understand me”) but that they *make an effort to do so*, since “try” also carries with it a sense of intentionality. She also uses “instead of,” which suggests that “focusing” on one’s accent is not only *different from* but is perhaps *mutually exclusive to* trying to understand him/her. So not only do Americans understand her, they intentionally attempt to do so and while they may not totally disregard her accent, it certainly is secondary to what she sees as their primary concern, which is that she is comprehensible.

### **“Accent” versus “Pronunciation”**

Teasing out the differences between what Yixuan considers to be *accent* and what she considers to be *pronunciation* is challenging. For instance, despite her assertion that most Americans find her *accent* comprehensible, Yixuan still struggles with her conflicting feelings about *pronunciation* and its effects on her intelligibility. She explains that “pronunciation. . . ALWAYS . . . make *trouble*, like for vocabulary, yeah they make *trouble* as well, but yeah like I, I met my language partner yester—last night? And I, I said one word like co-opeRAtive and she said ‘you should say co-Operative,’ something like that. Yeah, and we met like couple words that I have the pronunciation *problem*, so I still think the pronunciation is (.) very important” (Interview 4, December 2004). Yixuan’s use of words that carry a heavily negative connotation, such as “trouble” and “problem” (enhanced by her use of—and discursive stress put on—the adverb “always” in conjunction with the verb “make trouble”) and even her language partner’s



use of the modal “should” to indicate the fact that there are external expectations (about the syllabic stress of the word *cooperative*, for example) that Yixuan is not meeting work together to compound her uncertainty and insecurity about her pronunciation.

Part of the reason Yixuan is so conflicted about pronunciation is because she views it as very hard to change. She appears to have discovered through her experience what Lippi-Green (1997) describes as a kind of fossilization, wherein once a particular pronunciation of a word is learned, it is extremely difficult to learn a new way of pronouncing it:

yeah, I actually I found this problem very early just ah when I was in China. Sometime I try to *pay attention* to it but I didn't get a lot of *practice* . . .but here I maybe start to *pay attention* to it . . . But still *not good*, like, sometime I feel like my classmates know in the [ESL teacher's] classes the pronounce-ation is uh very *difficult thing to change* um I think their English I think all of their English are quite good. U:m *but* the pronounce-ations, *maybe* we will make some progress at the end of the semester. I think we *should* *but* it's like comparing other things like grammar, or it's, uh writing, reading, it's kind of *difficult* like ah at once, um, *once you, you have the idear of those pronounce-ations, you will be difficult to change it* (Interview 1, February 2004).

In this passage, she not only reaffirms her conviction that it is hard for her (and her ESL classmates) to change the pronunciation of English words and sounds, but by claiming that she and her classmates “should” be able to “make some progress by the end of the semester” she inserts the idea that there is some kind of external expectation that these changes in accent (“progress”) can be made over the course of a 4-month term. However, she starts initially by

saying “maybe” they will change their pronunciation and follows this with “but”—both hedges that suggest that she thinks this unlikely. She uses the word “difficult” three times, emphasizing how complicated a process she believes this to be.

Part of the difficulty Yixuan outlines in this passage involves the two factors she believes will make this “progress” possible: “practice” and “paying attention.” Practice, as she later explains it, is simply taking advantage of opportunities to interact with others in English (especially native speakers, judging from her other statements about interactions with her native speaking language partner and lab mates). “Paying attention” (which here seems to mean her monitoring of her own pronunciation) must happen—and can only happen—during this “practice.” It is as if, for Yixuan, interactions in English, especially with native speakers, afford her the greatest opportunity to assess her own pronunciation while simultaneously engaging in real and meaningful conversation. ESL classes do not appear to be places where the two strategies of “practice” and “paying attention” are easily employed, and as such, she is dubious about the extent to which these classes can reverse the fossilization wherein certain pronunciations of phonemes become entrenched in an individual’s speech.

### **Cultural Concerns I: the Discursive Divide**

Though Yixuan expresses a relative lack of concern with accent and pronunciation and finds validation in her spoken English from external sources, her own view of her abilities in English is vastly complicated. For instance, in addition to her insecurity about her English pronunciation, Yixuan’s concerns in communicating in English center around cultural concerns, specifically whether she is offending someone or embarrassing them or making them feel

uncomfortable by the topics she chooses to discuss or the style of conversation she employs or the vocabulary words she uses. She describes in the following excerpt what a typical “misunderstanding” with a native speaker interlocutor feels like to her:

But I think *they* are very *nice*, they just ah, maybe very *busy* and *they*, *they* don't want to like, *they want you* to like speak *clearly* what do you want to, TO, and they, maybe they cannot understand, 'cause *the different way we talk about a thing*, right? For, for Chinese people, *we are used to like um describe the detail firstly and um then tell you what I really want TO, but the American people seems like what you want TO, please tell me firstly and then you can say blah blah blah* so sometime when I say something to them, *they feel confused, what are you (.) talking about, I don't know what, (.) they may say I don't know what are you talking about so let me feel uh, okay I need to change my ways* or sometime if *I feel like uh, uh scared? I, I'd better stop it* (Interview 2, April 2004)

A number of the discursive features in this excerpt provide insight into Yixuan's complex view of herself as a speaker of English. For instance, a close examination of the way she employs pronouns in this excerpt reveals a number of assumptions or beliefs she holds about the people who inhabit her world. For instance, “they” refers fairly consistently to “American people;” this is of course to be expected since she is answering a question about her interactions with Americans, but it also serves to set up an interesting dynamic with the other two pronouns she uses: “we” and “you.”

The first binary Yixuan sets up is between “they” and “we,” in the sentence “*they* cannot understand, ‘cause the different way *we* talk about a thing” She explains that she and her Chinese compatriots employ a discursive style in which they first give “details” (the meaning of which is unclear—details about why they are discussing this issue? Background details of the situation/story/request they are presenting?) and then move to the ‘meat’ of the interaction: stating a request, possibly, or registering a complaint or explaining an important point. Americans, on the other hand, appear impatient with what Yixuan indicates is the Chinese conversational style, and her ventriloquation for them by saying “please tell me firstly and then you can say blah blah blah” infers two important points: that Americans prefer to have the crux of the matter presented to them initially (“firstly”), but perhaps more interestingly is her use of the colloquialism “blah, blah, blah” to suggest that the “details” Chinese interlocutors spend so much time on are “meaningless chatter” (Random House Webster’s Dictionary, 1999, p.139).

There is scholarship that adds credence to Yixuan’s concerns; Young (1982) notes that for native English speakers who listened to native Chinese speakers’ conversations often had trouble ferreting out important information, in part due to “a lack of understanding of how the important information was highlighted” (p. 79). Young highlights the fact that it is the English speakers’ ignorance of “alternative linguistic structures and discourse conventions” that led them to believe Chinese speakers of English were lacking in “clarity and forcefulness” (p. 79). Native English speakers expected an introductory statement to provide an overview of the argument being made, and the Chinese convention of setting the context first was frustrating to them. But to state up front the crux of the matter was judged by the Chinese participants (and likely to Yixuan as well) to be impolite and overly aggressive. Without resorting to stereotypical generalizations about

“Asian” or “Chinese” rhetorical styles, Young (1982) points out that the Chinese participants experienced as much “consternation and confusion” with American discourse styles as Yixuan does here, some twenty-plus years hence.

After describing her impressions of American expectations of certain discursive practices, Yixuan says twice that American interlocutors ask out of confusion “what are you talking about,” and her repetition of this phrase infers a sense of impatience on the part of the Americans in question. She clearly intends to impart a sense of impatience with these phrases, because her very next phrase is “let me feel” which appears to be a kind of hybrid of phrases a native speaker might employ, such as “makes me feel” or “lets me know.” Both phrases indicate that the speaker has been changed from thinking one way to thinking in another way, but “makes me feel” implies that one’s interlocutor has caused or imposed the change, while “lets me know” suggests that the interlocutor has provided information which may result in the hearer’s change of perspective but does not necessarily cause it. Thus the effect of Yixuan’s phrase “let me feel” is unclear but does seem to initiate a change both in perspective and behavior, because she then understands that she needs to “to change [her] ways.” Again, Yixuan’s use of the idiom “to change one’s ways” is confusing: does she mean she needs to change her style of conversation or completely change her discursive habits and behaviors? In either case, she then claims that “sometime if I feel like uh uh scared?” and that she “better stop it.” The level of threat to herself that Yixuan implies by using the idiomatic modal “had better” in terms of discontinuing the interaction is significant: “had better” implies the kind of external, social threat that “should” conveys, especially when paired with her previous phrase that she feels “scared.”

The upshot of this excerpt is that Americans' apparent frustration with her Chinese conversational style invokes feelings of fear and inadequacy in Yixuan—something that she doesn't seem to feel as a result of her accent when she interacts with Americans. It is unclear why these "cultural concerns" bother her so much more than the mechanics of, say, accent. Perhaps it is because she believes she is basically comprehensible enough to ensure that her words are understood and does not need to question whether or not her accent inhibits her words from being decoded and thus fears being misunderstood on a meaning-making level much more.

### **Cultural Concerns II: "Topics" of "Communication" and Appropriateness**

These concerns come to the fore again when Yixuan discusses her work situation. She spends a great deal of time talking about her fears that she is bringing up awkward topics with native speaker coworkers. In the following passage, she explains these fears:

I think the main reason is not like such special work environment. I think it's maybe cause I still feel some *uncomfortable*. Uh, I still have these *uncomfortable* feelings for speaking um English with native speakers, 'cause we, um, in our lab, we still have some native speakers, undergraduates, and actually there is a girl who cooperate with me to do the experiment, we *should have lot of communication*, and actually, we have *communication* but just ah um um concentrate on the *experimental stuffs instead of other things* and sometime I think it's not good, and we, we, I think I *should* talk with her *like other things, like some topic, maybe both of us are interested in, but it's—doing something, it's not the same thing as what you think, right?* So when I have the opportunity, both of us are, were, like doing fly work, and I prefer not to *say anything*,

but instead with Yen or Beiyan, we can *talk*, like even just ah use English, we can *talk* . . . I think if I say something *wrong*, they [native speakers] *feel awkward* too, and I don't want them *feel* such a, *uncomfortable*. I think I'm the person who *concern others' feelings too much*, so sometimes I don't want it, 'cause I think they are very nice *and I don't want to press them or put some burden on them* (Interview 2, April 2004).

Yixuan describes in this excerpt the essence of what may be seen as her “cultural conundrum:” she makes it clear that she wants to have “communication” with her native speaker lab-mates. Interestingly, “communication” is a word she uses almost exclusively to describe interactions with native speakers: of the nine times she uses this word in the course of the study, only twice does she use it to refer to interactions between non-native speakers. The two times she uses this token to describe exchanges between non-native speakers, it is to demonstrate a significant disparity in their levels of English: In the very first interview (February 2004), she describes a Chinese ESL teacher who has “informal communication” with her middle-school-aged students. The only other time she uses “communication” to describe an exchange between two Chinese speakers of English is when she talks about conversations with her brother, whom she sees as having near-nativelike command of English. She states that “we, we have some kind of um, I think com—*communication* problem or something, 'cause we don't have like similar level of the English. He can speak like VERY fast and very um smoothly but we can't and sometimes I can't understand what he saying.” It would appear that while Yixuan uses “talk” and “speak” in a number of different contexts, she reserves the noun “communication” to refer specifically to situations in which one interlocutor is perceived as having a significantly higher level of English ability.

This “communication” Yixuan desires is fraught with anxiety for her, however. She uses the word “uncomfortable” three times and the words “awkward” and “burden” to describe the way she believes native speakers feel about conversation with her. In the next excerpt, which is a continuation of the previous one, she explains the source of this anxiety: she does not know which topics and conversations are “appropriate.”

Yixuan: The problem is, *I don't know how to choose the topic, uh which topic is appropriate to ask them, which topic is not. That's the, like some personal things, I don't know the, the extent what I can reach, right culturally, what is appropriate to ask them and what they might, what might make them uncomfortable . . .yeah, 'cause if I ask some, like improper thing to them, they will answer me and but they may feel like uncomfortable but they will hide it just to show respect to me, but I, I don't know anything, right, they always very nice, but I don't want them, like feel like this way.*

Interviewer: Do they ever say anything to you that makes you uncomfortable or is too personal?

Y: No. *I think usually they don't ask me about any personal things, I think, I do ask them, I feel a little bit, but not many, just like this, um, maybe those undergraduates think that it's not good to ask us like graduate students or some people like higher level than them, I don't know.*



I: It's hard to know

Y: But maybe because *I* always say nothing to them about the *personal things*, so *they*, *they* feel like we don't want to talk about the *personal things* (Interview 2, April 2004).

Yixuan delves into the heart of her discomfort with native speaker interactions in this passage. She is confounded on two counts: first, she is troubled by her lack of knowledge as to which “topics” she can introduce in conversations with native speakers. It is perhaps noteworthy that the only time she uses the word “topic” is in this context—it connotes a level of formality that is only present in more ‘official’ work-related interactions, such as in conversation with her subordinates. She is unclear in particular about whether or not she should talk about “personal things” (a phrase she uses four times), and her confusion becomes circular: will her undergraduate labmates not want to talk about “personal things” with her, or do they not bring them up because they aren't sure she wants to talk about them? Both questions are also mired in Yixuan's understanding of hierarchy and “respect:” she explains that on the one hand, students may not want to talk about “personal things” but hide their discomfort to show respect to her if she initiates these topics, but on the other hand they may in fact want to or are willing to talk about “personal things” but assume it would be too forward of them to assume someone at a “higher level” would want to discuss such things.

Yixuan also uses “I” and “they/them” almost exclusively in this passage, which contrasts a bit with her use in other passages on the general second-person “you,” usually used in the same way “one” would be used. Her use of “I” and “them” sets her up in somewhat of a binary opposition

with her undergraduate coworkers, and the fact that she limits her use of pronouns to only the first and third person connotes a sense of personal investment and involvement on her part. Because she never uses “you” here to mitigate her role or responsibility, which she could feasibly do in almost every place where she uses “I,” the dilemma remains centered on the power disparity between herself and her native speaker co-workers.

Yixuan’s perception of respect and hierarchy create an interesting power dynamic here. Because she does not know which subject matter is “appropriate” (which apparently is any topic that will make her interlocutor “uncomfortable” in conversation), Yixuan seizes the power of determining appropriateness with the native speakers. Thus this move on her part would appear to tip the power balance in favor of the native speakers. However, since she sees herself as having a higher status than her undergraduate co-workers, she recognizes that this social “power” she seems to possess plays a role in constraining the native speaker students from calling the conversational shots, as it were.

Several other things about this passage are also noteworthy. For one, Yixuan does not talk at all about pronunciation—or accent-related issues here. She focuses, as she does in so many other cases, on issues of sociolinguistic competence rather than on accent or pronunciation. Yixuan’s focus on cultural appropriateness and pragmatics sets her apart from the other participants in these case studies; she is the only one concerned with others’ level of comfort with her in conversation and with issues of sociolinguistic aptitude and conversational appropriateness. It is unclear why this is such a focus for Yixuan and not for the others; perhaps it is her confidence in her comprehensibility that allows her to focus beyond the more mechanical aspects of linguistic

competence towards the more nebulous and nuanced issues of cultural competence. Whatever the case, she does appear to have quite different priorities in her language learning as compared to the other participants in this study.

### **Cultural Concerns III: A Call to the Classroom**

It is by now clear that Yixuan likely sees cultural competence as her number one concern in using English. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the lack of discussion of cultural issues is one of her big complaints about her ESL class:

I think that's, the *class told us the way how you should use English to talk*, but it's not like the *culture knowledge* and how to com—not how to, like um, like the, the, *the real core* what I what we want like to *KNOW this culture* and in-*incorporate* in this culture, and *you can feel free* in this new culture. Only, *the class cannot give you this thing*, right? That's why I think I should get this things from like the *undergraduate students* or *some other resource* instead of this (Interview 2, April 2004).

Yixuan employs a number of interesting lexical, suprasegmental and grammatical choices to explain her feelings about obtaining “culture knowledge.” By using the words “real” and “core” together, she emphasizes the importance of gaining an understanding of American culture. First, her use of “real” suggests that a knowledge of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary (“the way how you should use English”) is not what she *truly* desires to learn from this class and that her authentic and actual interest lies elsewhere. Her use of “core” indicates that this knowledge of culture is at the center of what she wishes to learn, and the combined effect of the two words

conveys a sense that this wish for cultural understanding is truly the heart of the matter and is the focus for her English language learning.

Yixuan employs prosodic elements to further emphasize the importance of gaining this cultural knowledge—she explains that “what I what we want like to KNOW,” and she increases her volume and her pitch on the word “KNOW” to drive home the fact that she and her peers want to obtain a deep understanding or knowledge of the culture.

Yixuan’s use of pronouns is also worth examining: she uses the third person plural (“we” and “us”) twice and uses the second person (“you”) and the first person (“I”) three times each. She appears to use “you” to mean something similar to the way she might use “one,” and the fact that two out of the three times she uses it, she follows it with a modal (“can” and “should”) implies the sense of generality associated with “one” and gives it a sense of a kind of a rule of thumb. Her choice of “you” instead of “one” mitigates the formal sense of “one” by, as Kuo (2003) explains, emphasizing an element of informality similar to the way the pronoun *ni* (you) is used in Mandarin. Perhaps more importantly, however, it shifts the focus to a more general, nebulous second-person instead of to the third or first person, both of which indicate more personal responsibility. In other words, if “you” can “feel free in this new culture,” Yixuan appears to be speaking generally of how things will be, but if she were to say “I” or “we” can, this construction could set up a sense of personal expectation for her (or her and her peers).

Even “I” and “we” have different levels of external expectation, however—she first uses “us” to establish her ability to speak for her ESL class as a whole, and then uses “we” to replace for “I”

after a false start. Since she is talking about student expectations for the ESL course and in particular the key issue of cultural adjustment, she is able to add more weight to her claim by switching from “I” to “we.” In fact, she only uses “I” when she talks about specific things she feels she must do individually (such as “get this things from like the undergraduate students or some other resource”) because “the class cannot give you this thing.” Following this more “general” use of “you” with “I” is a way for Yixuan to outline her personal responsibility and/or agency in the face of such a fact-like statement. She can access this sense of agency because her specific work situation and experience permit them (“I should get these things from like the undergraduate students”).

### **Classroom Dynamism: A Teacher’s Shifting Self-Assessment**

One of the most interesting things about Yixuan’s entry into the classroom as a teacher is the way it forces her to reassess her English proficiency. At least early on, Yixuan views her teaching experience as a failure, and while she certainly expounds on the role played by culture and the way it dictates classroom dynamics, she also re-examines her view of her own language proficiency and the extent to which this has contributed to the strife she sees in her classroom.

We actually had lot of *troubles* with, well, um . . . for the TA for the whole semester? I, I didn’t have like comfortable feeling, *it’s not a happy journey* but yeah, I did learn a LOT . . . Well, actually, for the like the Wednesday and Thursday sections? ‘cause we, we have the same material for the whole section for each of the week, so, for the second and third one, I probably did *better* then *better, but* for, for the first ah one, ‘*cause I KNOW like some students, sometimes they, they couldn’t understand me and they are like this*

*((makes face))* and sometimes they, I, *I can feel some student um not patient to my explanation* or something or *they just, just like WHATEV^ER* (Interview 3, November 2004)!

In this passage, Yixuan makes clear that one of the main reasons her semester of teaching has not been “a happy journey” is because of communication problems between herself and her students. She recognizes full well their annoyance with her (in their minds, lack of) English proficiency, and uses a combination of prosody, iconic gestures, vocabulary and grammatical structures to convey her understanding of their frustration and her own subsequent disappointment.

The way Yixuan employs prosody is of particular note in this instance. While she hedges somewhat that her experience with her second section of students is “better,” the increased volume with which she insists “I KNOW,” emphasizes not her students’ dissatisfaction with her but rather her awareness of it; it is as if she thinks her students or her interlocutor might not know or expect that she can sense her students’ reactions and feel their disapproval. Her emphasis on having this knowledge is somewhat empowering to her, because she has knowledge she does not expect anyone else to know she has.

Yixuan also uses pitch and stress to convey her students’ reactions to her. She explains that “they just, just like WHATEV^ER,” and it is her precise imitation of American college students’ common pronunciation of this word (whatEVer) that allows her to convey their sense of frustration. While what she is expressing is her students’ disapproval of her English proficiency, it is ironic that the way she demonstrates her understanding of their feelings is by using her

sophisticated knowledge of English to utilize the exact words and pronunciation patterns these students themselves employ.

Um, I feel *such difference* when I took part in the uh ESL class ‘cause *the teacher*, I think probably *like some independent person, personal style or something like that*, ‘cause *the teacher* told us a lot about how to like um face those complaint and how to uh *separate yourself with the student, but in China, probably just ah my personal style*, I, *I would like to have some close relationship between the student, sometimes I want to be one of the member of the students, and it WORKED in China, but here, sounds like sometimes they, they I don’t know, they-they-they probably there is not a very good like communication between me and them even though I tried to, I tried very hard, ‘cause I took LOT of effort and time each week, to-for preparing it but it turned out, ((laughs)) it’s not, not good effect what I expected* (Interview 3, November 2004).

At first blush, this paragraph serves to encapsulate again Yixuan’s confusion as to cultural appropriateness. While she categorizes her problem in wanting a more power-neutral relationship with her students as one of “personal style,” she takes pains to point out that she has been told by “the teacher” (her ESL teacher, presumably) that such a stance is not appropriate in the American classroom. Her American teacher advocates a more “independent” and “separate” relationship than the one she had with her students back in China. However, it is clear Yixuan feels ambivalent about this more “independent” position in that she uses the reflexive pronoun “yourself” in “how to separate yourself with the student.” Her choice of this particular pronoun is telling because it is the only time in this passage she uses it—every other time she uses a

personal pronoun here, she either uses “I” or “my” or “they” and “them.” Whether she uses it to create a sense of informality with her interlocutor or whether she uses it to distance herself from (or express her ambivalence about) the idea that one should be “separate” from her students, her choice of this particular reflexive pronoun is interesting.

This excerpt serves another purpose as well—it appears to illustrate best the conflict Yixuan has between her pre-teaching assessment of her English-speaking abilities and the way she sees her intelligibility through her students’ eyes. She explains that she “tried very hard” and “took a LOT of effort and time each week” to write out her lesson plans and practice difficult words before her classes met (Interview 3, November 2004). However, these diligent preparations are ineffectual; her use of the words “even though I tried” and “not . . . what I expected” suggests the result she anticipates—presumably, some kind of appreciation on the part of her students for her efforts—are not what comes to pass. While she hedges somewhat by saying “I don’t know” and “probably,” it is clear that she believes the “communication” between herself and her students to be unsatisfactory. Again, it is important to point out her choice of the word “communication” here, because, as discussed in the section about her interactions with her native-speaking undergraduate lab-mates, she uses this word primarily to describe exchanges between herself and someone with what she believes to be superior English proficiency.

Her lack of confidence in her English proficiency appears at odds with her self-assessments earlier in the study. Her use of the adverbial clause “even though” in the utterance “there is not a very good like communication between me and them *even though* I tried to, I tried very hard, ‘cause I took LOT of effort and time each week, to-for preparing it” also suggests that her



attempts to better prepare her lessons are in some way intended to compensate for the “communication” problems she believes she and her students are having.

Yixuan’s apparent need to offset any misunderstanding that her use of English might have caused, combined with the way she uses “communication” to convey the power structure between her and her students, suggests that her confidence in her English-speaking abilities has taken a powerful blow. Up until her teaching experience, she has believed that her English was at least passable in being able to maintain understanding with most native and non-native speakers of English. Even when she doubted her abilities to find appropriate topics to discuss with her native-speaking undergraduate colleagues, she believed that her reasonable intelligibility combined with her senior status was enough to balance the power between herself and her interlocutors. Here, however it appears that her students’ native speaker status and her reluctance to assert her discursive power in the classroom work together to stymie her confidence in her English proficiency. In fact, she explains in the very next excerpt that her perceived problems with English usage are the precise reason that the methods she employed in China do not work in the context of the American classroom:

Students say like I’m a *good teacher* in China, why just as because I think like I took a lot of effort to make the material *more* organized and *more* EASIER for student to understand. *But ‘cause the barrier of the language, I feel difficult* to do that, that’s why to a lot of time on it, *but it turns out I still* can’t make it work efficiently (Interview 3, November 2004)

Yixuan emphasizes once again the importance of “taking a lot of effort” to improve the clarity and organization of her lessons. It is unclear, however, whether she means that her facility (or lack thereof) with English prevents her from making the material more organized or if, because her students believe her English to be unclear, they simply don’t understand the improvements she has made to the presentation of the materials. What is clear is that the cause part of the because/then clause “but ’cause the barrier of the language” leads to the effect that she “feel difficult to do that” and “still can’t make it work” and thus demonstrates that she believes language to be at the heart of the conflict. In any event, her use of the phrase “it turns out I still can’t make it work,” and in particular the token “still,” indicate that these efforts are not just intense but sustained as well, which perhaps deepens her disappointment that they are not appreciated.

Yixuan also describes scenarios in which she believes her language proficiency has actually played a role in creating conflict. In the next passage, for example, she describes an incident during a post-lab discussion in which both her listening comprehension and intelligibility are drawn into question:

I actually write, write one questions and then, uh a student say some, said something *but I don’t understand*. And I try to ask to him to, to, to speak their question *again and again*, *but I can’t understand* and other student like kind of impatient? for that and they, the, the student who ASKED the question give up. He said “*Never mind*, don’t worry about that.” but others *still* tried to explain the question to me. And finally *it turned out*, the guy, the

students just ah said okay, this question you *actually, you* have (.) talk, *I* have talked about the question in the pre-lab or during the experiment (Interview 3, November 2004).

A number of phrases stand out in this excerpt. The first two worth examining are the similar phrases “but I don’t understand” and “but I can’t understand.” While these two phrases are almost identical in structure, they convey very different feelings of frustration. The first phrase appears in the sentence “a student say some, said something but I don’t understand.” Yixuan’s use of the coordinating conjunction “but” as opposed to “and” or even a relative pronoun such as “that” (ie, “a student . . . said something but I don’t understand” versus “a student . . . said something that I don’t understand”) reveals an assumption or expectation that Yixuan believes she *should* understand her student and does not. Her frustration therefore comes from her listening comprehension not meeting the expectations she has for herself.

The second phrase “but I can’t understand,” on the other hand, comes on the heels of the phrase “again and again” and denotes Yixuan’s sense of her own and her students’ impatience that has grown with each of the students’ repetitions (“again and again”) of the question at hand. She is aware, too, that the frustration in the classroom is not merely located within herself and her interlocutor, because she notes that “other student kind of like impatient” because even when the inquirer gives up, “others still try to explain the question to me.” Yixuan’s frustration with her listening comprehension in not being able to understand her students’ question is exacerbated by the other students’ insistence on repeating the question, which appears to demonstrate their frustration with her lack of comprehension as well.

What is possibly most telling about this excerpt is that the student eventually realizes that Yixuan has already discussed the very question he is asking about during their pre-lab session. It is unclear how he comes to this realization, but it certainly suggests that he either was not attending the earlier conversation or that he was unable to understand at least part of it. Yixuan, however, does not stop to consider that the initial problem was that the student, for whatever reason—her accent, some difficulty with the subject matter on his part, his lack of focus on her presentation—did not comprehend what she was saying. As a result, she interprets this scenario, at least initially, by primarily assigning the responsibility for the confusion to her inability to understand the students' later complaints and not to problems with her intelligibility (or let alone to their lack of attention to her pre-lab discussion).

As she continues, she introduces the idea of responsibility and builds further on the fact that language is not the central issue:

Yixuan: I, I'm not quite sure ((laughs)) about my feeling, *if it's my fault or theirs* or something *but* yeah, it's ah not, like *com[fortable]*

Interviewer: [right, it's uncomfortable] because you feel there's a distance between you and the students

Y: yeah

I: because they are disappointed for whatever reason, whether it's a good reason or not a good reason

Y: yeah, and it turned out that like *I think probably after this section and the following week, I still* feel some . . .some like

I: discomfort?

Y: yeah, they, it seems like *they are not satisfied with me* (Interview 3, November 2004).

Yixuan begins this passage which suggests that she is, to some extent, concerned about whose responsibility it is to make a conversation successful. She follows this statement with the coordinating conjunction “but” and goes on to say that the interaction is not comfortable. This presents two interesting ideas: one, by stating that “I’m not quite sure about my feeling, if it’s my fault or theirs,” she allows for the possibility that the discomfort in the conversation *could* be caused by the native speaker students—something of a challenge to the myth of native speaker superiority, which dictates that any and all misunderstandings or miscommunications are to be attributed to the non-native speaker in the conversation. Yixuan resists this notion in this sentence and then goes on to say “but yeah it’s, ah, not like comfortable.” Her use of “but” here serves to toss the question of responsibility out the rhetorical window—it doesn’t matter whose fault it is, she seems to be saying, because what’s at issue is the discomfort itself.

Yixuan describes this discomfort as a sense of her students not being “satisfied” with her, and her word choice here reveals a number of assumptions. First, while she has earlier dismissed the question of blame in terms of who has *caused* the discomfort, her choice to use “satisfied” suggests that she may actually believe she is the cause. The fact that she believes her students should be or expect to be “satisfied” and the semantic aura around the word “satisfied” suggests an almost mercantile relationship between Yixuan and her students. It is not unusual for American students to frame their relationships with their Teaching Assistants (TAs) and especially International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) in economic terms, and it is entirely likely that Yixuan has become sensitized to—and now relies on—this way of framing their relationship as well. In such a framework, students are consumers and ITAs are vendors or contractors and students use their status as consumer or “customer” to demand certain levels of service for the “fees” they have paid (such as tuition). Yixuan’s use of the word “satisfied,” together with the fact that “they” are the subject of the sentence and Yixuan is the object of the preposition has something of a cumulative effect on the students’ positions as the power holders in this scenario.

The fact that native speaker students are being given the discursive upper hand in this situation is not necessarily surprising for an ITA in Yixuan’s situation. However, this excerpt, compounded with the other excerpts reveals a growing attenuation of Yixuan’s confidence in her English proficiency and in her efficacy as a teacher. Before teaching, she was concerned more with cultural constraints on talk than on her listening and speaking capabilities. She also had constructed a strong identity for herself as a “good” teacher. Both of these self-identifications are dealt a serious blow by her experiences in the classroom, however.

Perhaps because she began with an unusually high level of confidence in her English-speaking abilities, Yixuan is not entirely discouraged by the disappointments she has experienced. In the next excerpt, which occurs at the end of her teaching semester, she contends that the issues she and her students encountered at the beginning of the semester—which she now attributes to her pronunciation, something she did not do previously—have been overcome to some extent by the fact that the students have become acclimated to her accent. She also suggests that emotional connections between two parties may assist in their ability to understand each other, a contention which is supported by Nisbett & Wilson's (1977) study that explains the "halo effect" that displays of positive affect reduced listeners' self-reported "annoyance" with a speaker's foreign accent (p. 250).

Yixuan: I think for pronunciation problem, we have like kind of period that we can get used to, like for example I took the class uh whose the, I mean the instructor is a Japanese, we HAVE difficulty to understand him, but later, like after we get used TO, we can, we can KNOW what he wants to say, just like this

Interviewer: right

Y: probably *we don't have some emotional reaction* or something? *but* we know, we know what he's saying. I think probably the same case when I *communicate* with my students, so that's why at the end of the course, it seems like *we, we get along with each other well but* for grammar and, and voca<sup>^</sup>bulary, that's kind of problem that *we can't*

*overcome* in a short period. If *I* missed one uh key word, probably *they* can't make sense, understand what *I WANT* to say.

I: so they may not know enough about physiology to know what word you mean, to be able to figure out the other vocabulary for what you mean, but they're, it's easier for them to get used to accent differences.

Y: Yeah, I think so.

I: So maybe at the beginning of the semester, there's more confusion based on accent but at the end of the semester, the confusion tends to come more from grammar and vocabulary because students are then USED to your accent?

Y: yeah just as to some extent. Probably *they* still have some problem with *my* pronunciation, but *must* be easier than the beginning of the semester (Interview 4, December 2004).

Several utterances in this passage call for further scrutiny. One is the example Yixuan presents about the Japanese professor she had whom she found difficult to understand. She describes not being able to understand him, but then notes that "after we get used to" his way of speaking, "we can KNOW what he wants to say." Her emphasis on the word "know" suggests that by repeated exposure to his way of speaking, they are eventually able to draw his meaning from his words in spite of his pronunciation differences. Oddly, however, she mentions that she and her classmates



“don’t have some emotional reaction” and it is unclear at first what she means here. One possible—and likely—explanation is that they have no positive emotional connection to him and *despite* this lack of goodwill (as suggested by her use of the coordinating conjunction “but”), they are able to “know what he’s saying.” Then she implies that the same situation exists for her students and herself and suggests that they should have even fewer misunderstandings because “we get along with each other well.” However, she believes that because of errors in her grammar and the students’ lack of knowledge in the subject of the class (physiology), she and her students are still not able to achieve optimum “communication,” despite their apparent camaraderie.

At first blush, it may seem as though she believes that she and her students have still not been able to accomplish much synergy as a group, as she employs the I/they binary of pronouns and uses the word “communication,” which, as observed earlier in this analysis, she uses almost exclusively in interactions with speakers whose English proficiency she believes to be far superior to her own. In addition, the students (as “they”) are put in the subject position in the sentence “*they* still have some problem with my pronunciation” However, she does use the pronoun “we” in two instances: that “*we* get along with each other well” and also that “*we* can’t overcome.” While she does say the latter in reference to problems that still plague them as a group, the fact that she chooses the first person plural demonstrates that she has begun to see them as a cohesive unit striving for a shared goal. She finishes the exchange by saying “probably they still have some problems with my pronunciation but must be easier than the beginning of the semester.” Even this statement dilutes the power of the I/they binary and the structural

[they=subject]/[Yixuan's pronunciation=object of the preposition] structure with the words “probably,” “some” and the coordinating conjunction “but.”

The main thrust of this passage is that yes, Yixuan believes that she and her students have had some communication problems but that these have largely been overcome by their ability to “get along” and that, while this is the first time she has truly put weight on the idea that it may be her pronunciation differences which—at least in the students' eyes—have been the source of some misunderstanding. While her fairly consistent rejection of the myth of native speaker superiority has been destabilized somewhat by her teaching experience, her view of herself as a proficient, competent and intelligible speaker of English is still fairly intact.

### **Conclusion**

Yixuan's identity during the period of this study was in some ways rather fluid but in others was quite grounded. For instance, pronunciation and accent are never a huge concern for Yixuan; she believes she is intelligible and that Americans find her to be so also; she believes that even if she is not as intelligible as she'd like to be that Americans aren't terribly concerned with accent anyway; and finally, she believes that the pronunciation of common words is very difficult to change and that it is best to focus on aspects of one's language that one has a better chance of changing, such as vocabulary or grammar. These beliefs waver little during the course of the study, even in the final throes of her first semester of teaching, which is the first time she seems to allow the idea that accent might be one of the reasons for some of the communication problems in her classroom. And when she does introduce the idea that perhaps it is her pronunciation that is behind classroom misunderstandings, she immediately points out that

students can get used to an accent over the course of a term and cites a scenario from her own experience as evidence.

The other constant in Yixuan's talk is her insistence on the importance of "culture things." She explains her troubles with cultural competence in this excerpt from a July 2004 questionnaire thus: "I don't know which words are proper for a specific situation so that I can prevent misunderstanding or even annoying somebody. It's like that I face a dark sea that I've never known how deep it is." This passage encapsulates her concerns about cultural mores and influences: one, she believes that it is her responsibility to fulfill her interlocutor's discursive expectations and that if someone is "annoyed" by aspects of the interaction, she is to blame. She is almost preoccupied with how her interlocutors *feel* but never feels she has enough information to proceed. The "dark sea" of Americans' discourse conventions, her own choice of topics and her place in the conversational 'pecking order' and the way ESL classes could address these issues account for a great deal of the conversational focus in these data.

The picture of Yixuan that emerges from a close analysis of the data here is one of a woman who believes in and acts on her own competence as a speaker of English. She is largely unconcerned with issues of pronunciation and accent and believes herself to be comprehensible. Her family, advisor and colleagues ratify this view of herself. In addition, she believes—at the beginning of the study, anyway—that she is a "good" teacher and recognizes early on in her experiences teaching in the US that these talents and skills may not transfer well to the American context. While her teaching experiences force her to re-examine many of her self-assessments, she emerges from this study with a sense of her identity as an intelligible speaker of English intact.

## CHAPTER III: JOHN'S CASE

### Background and Introduction

John is a Chinese man in his early 20s who came to a large, mid-Atlantic R1 university to pursue a PhD in physics. His schooling is fairly typical of others of his generation in China—his first exposure to English language education was in high school, which for him started at age 12. Students were given “words to learn” (Interview 1, February 2004), which apparently meant that they were to memorize lists of words and the teacher would direct the students to adjust their pronunciation as necessary. Because classes were large by US standards (70 children), the only spoken English practice students got was when individual students were called on to recite words aloud.

### Early Language Learning Experiences

John, it seems, was ambivalent about learning English early on and this attitude appears to have stayed with him throughout high school and university. He explains how his initial feelings of interest in and enjoyment of learning English changed:

and so, this class, you know the uh textbook of the English in China is a kind of, there's some small sentence and a small—there's small articles, uh SHORT articles . . .and uh the teacher always ask us who want to recite the text, and so, if nobody raise their hand, I, I'm always the first one. Okay, I'd like to try? And so I will recite the *WHOLE* text and uh so, so I, I think, I think at the beginning, I'm very enjoying it, but um after maybe one or two years? Uh I foc—I put almost

ALL my energy to the mathematics and physics. So ((laughs)) I almost have no time to study, to study English (Interview 1, February 2004)

Because John held the position of ‘head student’ in his class, which was something like an assistant to the teacher, the onus of volunteering to answer the teacher’s directives and questions often fell to him and as a result, he probably had more chances to read aloud in English than any of his peers. However, it’s not clear that John always regarded this scenario as a positive thing: his emphasis on the word “whole” in the sentence “I will recite the **WHOLE** text” suggests that for him, learning English was considered time-consuming and laborious. In addition, John’s desire to study mathematics and physics becomes his academic focus in high school, and in the intensely competitive world of school, absorbs any time he might have spent learning English.

Learning English does not come back into sharp focus for John until his senior year, when he realizes he must pass a rigorous exam in English in order to be accepted at University. One of his teachers agrees to help him study, and John credits this teacher with helping pass the exam. John explains that grammar is the top priority in studying for the test, since there is “no listening, no speaking.” Once at university, however, English classes begin to focus more on reading than on grammar. John also decides in university that he wants to study abroad, which means he will have to take two standardized tests, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). John explains that “GRE and TOEFL exams focus on the reading, not too much on grammar,” so he adjusts his priorities of learning grammar to focus more on reading (Interview 1, February 2004).

It is not until the prospect of actually going to study in the United States sinks in for John that begins to concern himself at all with learning to communicate orally. He explains this as something of a cultural phenomenon, based on the assumption that learning to speak English fluently is something of a subconscious process:

Actually, I didn't concerned about speaking when I in China, you know, Chinese people always have the concept that if you came to, if you come to the United States, your *speaking English will be very good after a period of time*. (Interview 1, February 2004).

Because John is not specific about the mechanism through which “your speaking English will be very good after a period of time,” it is difficult to speculate as to how much of a role the native speaker plays in this concept of learning English, if at all. What the vagueness of John's language might belie, however, is the prevalent folksy belief that second language acquisition happens much like first language acquisition, wherein if one is surrounded by native speakers of one's new language, one will eventually start to understand the language subconsciously and begin to speak it quickly and almost effortlessly. Surely it is possible that John's language is vague because he simply doesn't have the words to describe the language learning process, but it seems just as likely that he—like many people—simply believes that the language acquisition is both a natural and automatic byproduct of being surrounded by speakers of another language and thus is by nature, vague and inexplicable.

The next phase of John's English language 'instruction' gives him a chance to test this theory of language learning, and he concludes that this belief of one's English becoming good over a period of time is a "misunderstanding" (Interview 1, February 2004). It is the first time that the myth of native speaker superiority appears to show its influence:

After a few, after a few month-es, I think, because *sometimes I have to communication with uh, you know, American people*, and oh, almost, I must, I think *almost all of them are very nice*, but uh because sometimes *my English is bad* and I have some difficulty to communicate with them, so I think, and sometimes, in the class, *I have difficult to understand the professor*. Oh, I think, I think it's really hard for me (Interview 1, February 2004).

This excerpt is interesting because it demonstrates so clearly the way that John situates himself in relation to native speakers (which is, for him, interchangeable with "American people"). His pronominal use indicates his complete ownership of any communication problems, as he explains that "*I have difficulty to understand*" and "*my English is bad*" (emphasis mine). He even points out that the Americans he interacts with are "very nice," as if to pre-empt the possibility that the misunderstandings occurred because of a bad attitude on the part of the native speaker interlocutor.

The final phase of John's formal instruction in English begins upon his arrival in the US. The university he attends has a spoken English assessment for all incoming international graduate teaching assistants, and John scores well below the threshold at which he would be allowed to

assume teaching responsibilities. He is assigned a complement of three classes which focus on pronunciation but which also instruct students in appropriate cultural practices in the US academic context. International teaching assistants (ITAs) who enroll in these classes must earn an A in their class before they are permitted to matriculate to the next level, and after the final class, they must pass a formal post-evaluation in which they give a mini-lecture which simulates the kind of presentations they will be doing in the classroom. They are assessed by members of the Department of Applied Linguistics, faculty members from their own academic departments, and, sometimes, volunteer undergraduate students. John was taking the second of the three courses when he joined the study. He had been required to take the first course twice and thus had had three different ESL instructors at this particular university so far.

### **Native Speaker Myth: A Utilitarian View**

Early in his participation with this study, John's acceptance of the native speaker myth appears to be centered around mostly utilitarian concerns. Because he has already had over a year of experience living in the US and speaking English, it is perhaps unsurprising that his perception of his language experiences is bound up in his need to communicate with others in a primarily English-speaking environment and that he is able to overlook more nuanced social consequences of accent discrimination. In the following excerpt, this utilitarian view of accent is clear, but still seems heavily influenced by ideologies that privilege the native speaker accent:

Interviewer: Do you think it would be better if you sounded like an American?

John: Yes, I did.



I: And why, why do you think that?

J: I think because sometimes, some native Americans can't understand you, it because of your pronunciation, some, your, for some words, your pronunciation is not, is *wrong*, so, maybe, maybe they are thinking what they talking about? I think that's—if your pronunciation is the same as native speakers, it's *better*, it's very, you, you can communicate with people very well, more *better*. (Interview 1, February 2004)

For instance, he assumes that pronunciation that is not like that of native speakers is “wrong” and that if one’s pronunciation is “the same” as native speakers, it is “better.” John’s use of qualifiers like “wrong” and “better” suggest that he has internalized the myth of native speaker superiority, wherein pronunciation that is more similar to native speakers is considered qualitatively better than pronunciation that is not the “same” as native speakers’ talk. However, by shifting the focus to the practical implications of sounding more natively like (such as the ability to “communicate”), John appears less concerned about the other social implications of sounding more like a native speaker. He is focused on an improved ability to “communicate with people” rather than the social concerns such as racism and xenophobia that some scholars associate with this internalization of the native speaker myth (Lippi-Green 1997; Rickford & Rickford 2000). This is perhaps the knottiest aspect of accent discrimination: drawing a line between affirming the obvious utility of speaking in a way that accommodates the expectations of native speakers and

recognizing the way this accommodation might (perhaps unintentionally) feed racist or xenophobic attitudes (Lippi-Green 1997, Cook 1992, Jenkins 2002).

In the next excerpt, John elaborates on his desire to sound more like a native speaker of English and in particular points out the relationship between his goal and the amount of work involved in reaching such a goal:

Interviewer: Do you think it would be a lot of hard work to::: change your pronunciation the way you want it to be?

John: Yes, there is *a lot of work* you have to do to change your *accent* and pronunciation

I: Do you think *it's, it would be WORTH it* if you could do it, would it be::?

J: Mm. (.) yes, *it would be very worth*. (Interview 1, February 2004)

John's insistence that it would "be very worth" the amount of effort involved suggests two new layers to his reliance on the native speaker model: one, that becoming like a native speaker is "a lot of work;" in other words, only those who put forth significant effort can hope to sound like native speakers. While John's phrase "a lot of work" can be seen as merely a repetition of the interviewer's phrase "a lot of hard work," his use of this phrase is nonetheless significant, because either he is ventriloquating this phrase because the interviewer—a native speaker—has just used it and he believes it to be vested with some authority or precision because she has

chosen it, or else he really believes that changing one's "accent"—a word he inserts, not one offered by the interviewer—is, in his mind anyway, a laborious process.

The second layer of John's utterance is that he believes despite the work involved, the goal to become nativelike is nonetheless a worthy one. Note that when he repeats the interviewer's phrase "it would be worth it," John leaves out "it," which disrupts the grammatical structure of the idiom *to be worth it*. John's one-second pause and his subsequent omission suggests that he is either not totally familiar with this idiom and is, again, simply parroting the phrase to demonstrate his agreement with the interviewer or that he is focusing on the word "worth," which he already knows, and simply does not recognize the larger idiomatic structure of the phrase. John's omission here actually raises more questions than it answers, because it highlights the difficulty of using a discourse-based approach like CDA with a second-language speaker that has been developed with, by and for native speakers. However, regardless of whether he is repeating phrases from his native-speaker interlocutor *precisely because she is a native speaker* or whether these phrases actually reflect his feelings on the subject, it seems clear that John is heavily invested in the prominent role of the native speaker as a model for his use of American English.

John's reliance on this native speaker myth becomes more apparent over the course of this study. In his second interview, which took place in April 2004, he was able to articulate not only that he believed he had problems with accent, but was able to pinpoint specific aspects of his pronunciation that were causing him difficulty:

Interviewer: When there is a misunderstanding, is it because of accent, vocabulary or grammar?

John: All of them.

I: Which problem happens the most often?

J: Accent.

I: What about accent is confusing?

J: Maybe my pronunciation.

I: What about your pronunciation? Certain sounds?

J: Yes, some kind of *words*.

I: What kind?

J: *V, WL, N*. Yeah it's kind of pronunciation. (Interview 2, April 2004)

At this stage of his experience, John has developed his ability to talk a bit more precisely what problems he perceives within his own pronunciation. By contrast, in the first interview, he is asked if anyone has ever commented on his pronunciation or accent, and he explains:

John: My English TEACHER told me there's some *words* I have to::, mm, have to focus

Interviewer: Your English teacher here [in the US]? Ms. X?

J: *Ms. X and Ms. Y and Ms. W*, you know. (Interview 1, February 2004)

So at the time of the first interview, then, John has had confirmation not just from one ESL teacher but from *three* that there are areas in which he needs to focus on pronunciation more carefully. However, his choice to say that he needs to focus on certain “words” suggests either that he believes there are simply isolated words which are problematic for his interlocutors or that his language skills are not robust enough to explain his concerns about his accent more precisely. He does explain these issues in more detail in the later interview, where, while he still uses “words” to describe his pronunciation problems, he demonstrates his understanding that there are consistent differences between the way he produces specific sounds within certain words and the expectations his native speaker interlocutors have for the way these sounds should be rendered. Thus he changes from talking about specific *words* being problematic to identifying patterns—specific *sounds* within these *words*—that he believes must change in order for him to sound more comprehensible, which for him is almost always equated with sounding more

nativelike. It is almost beside the point whether John is able to more clearly articulate his beliefs about his linguistic shortfalls because he has either developed the vocabulary to describe it or because he has been exposed to ESL instruction which has pinpointed his areas of difference; the point is that he couldn't—or didn't—express it in such a specific way before, and now he can—and does. It is clear to him that not being able to produce sounds the way a native speaker does is his pitfall.

The following excerpt lays out even more explicitly the distinctions John makes between accent and pronunciation, but also how he deals with misunderstandings in real time and how his perception of his language differences have changed over the course of a few months. It is lengthy but quite revealing in the way it lays out his negotiations with interlocutors:

Interviewer: If someone didn't understand your accent, how would you change it? Say you say something like "I had to do this really annoying problem?" And someone said "what? What did you say?" How would you change what you said so that they would understand you better?

John: Actually, what I usually do is I would repeat this sentence once again. If they cannot still understand, then I'll, I have to, I came up with other ways to, to rephrase it. Well, I think generally, people can understand me. I mean, after I just repeat it.

I: Okay, so repeat it back to me.

J: I have this annoying problem.

I: Okay. And now maybe what if I said “a, a annoying problem?” What would you say to me?

J: Yes. 'cause that's what I said.

I: Okay, because what I hear when I hear you say that, is I hear that, and I think this is typical for your region of China, that sometimes the L sound and the N sound can, and I think in your dialect, they're probably the same.

J: L and N?

I: Mm-hm, so light and night? [can be said very similarly]

J: [ah, yeah, yeah] very similar, yeah.

I: And so because the word “annoying” has that N-sound in it, what I'm hearing when I hear you say it is more like an L-sound

J: Oh!

I: So that might be confusing [for me] if I said something like “alloying, what?”

J: [oh yeah] Okay, now I understand you, you know, ‘cause you know, for, uh, for ME is accent, is like what you, I mean, it’s like intonation or something [so that’s why] okay so, [accent is more] important. Well, uh

I: [o::kay] [o:::kay] so like pronunciation

J: Like pronunciation, is like L and N part you, you cannot pronounce it well, I encounter this kind of situation often and frequently

I: So would you say, so if we went back to the question again that when you have a miscommunication, um, I’ll use the word pronunciation instead of accent, do you think it’s because of pronunciation or again, do you think it’s still usually the way that you, um, the way that you:: use the words, or the words that you use might be confusing?

J: I think it’s like half and half.

I: Okay, so sometimes it might be something like the L and the N and sometimes it might be:: just the fact that you used one word when they were expecting a different word.



J: Such as when I say “word,” sometimes, you know, I USED to pronounce like “vord” but now, I’m pretty, I mean, when I pronounce the W, wh--the W, I’m always worried like yeah

I: So you think about it all the time?

J: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s why I think it’s, yeah, the pronunciation is also very important. (Interview 5, December 2004)

This excerpt reveals a number of important understandings on John’s part. First, the interviewer sets up a scenario where a misunderstanding might occur because of an “accent” difference. When she gives an example of what she believes to be an accent-related misunderstanding, John is forced to modify his earlier concept of pronunciation being *part of* accent to its being something *separate and distinct* from accent—accent is intonation, for instance, but pronunciation is—as he has stated in the earlier interview—more concerned with the production of individual phonemes. An additional complicating layer in this interaction is that John, because of his native dialect, appears unable to hear the difference between the sounds /l/ and /n/, so when the interviewer tries to make clear the distinction between “annoying” and “alloying,” he cannot unravel what she is trying to do. This part of the excerpt is of particular interest because John specifically named the phonemes “V, W, L, N” as his specific areas of pronunciation focus in an interview more than seven months previous to this one, but still seems unable to hear the difference between /l/ and /n/. However, he has been able to disentangle the differences between

/v/ and /w/, at least in some tokens such as “word.” What is the phenomenon at work here? Is John able to hear these phonemes some of the time and not others? Is his early focus on problematic “words” rather than individual phonemes recurring?

In trying to puzzle out what is happening in this excerpt, a scene from the movie *Lethal Weapon IV* came to mind. In one scene, an African-American character and a Caucasian-American character (played, ironically, by an Australian), walk into a Chinese restaurant and jokingly ask the maitre d' for the “fried lice,” and are immediately told by the Chinese host that, “it’s fried rice, you plick.” While certainly this scene *is* scripted for laughs, it does suggest that higher-frequency tokens (such as *fried rice* for a purveyor of Chinese food) might gain almost an iconicity in their pronunciation, so that for John, the word “word,” might be such a high-frequency word that he has relearned it as a iconic unit rather than a set of individualized phonemes. Or perhaps it is merely because he uses the token “word” so often that he has become sensitized to the presence of a “trouble” phoneme (/w/) in this token, whereas the word “annoying” is low-frequency enough for him not to have become sensitized to the presence of a “trouble” phoneme (/n/) in it. Whatever the case, certainly his attention to the phoneme /w/ in “word” seems at odds with his inability to hear or produce the difference between /l/ and /n/.

He repeats his impression that accent is of ultimate importance in the fourth interview as well, which took place in November of 2004:

Interviewer: If you could choose one or two things about your English to be perfect, which is most important: grammar, vocabulary and *accent*.

John: First is *accent*, and then is vocabulary. Grammar is the last.

I: So the most important thing is *accent*, and if you have a good enough *accent*, Americans can understand you.

J: Yeah.

I: So if your grammar's not too good, it doesn't matter as long as your accent is okay.

J: Yeah. Sometimes [Americans] even make fun with President Bush...President Bush also got some *grammar problems* ((laughs)) (Interview 4, November 2004)

This passage, while perhaps amusing, also reveals John's understanding of the way accent intersects with pragmatics: he does not seem to recognize President Bush's regional accent, or if he does, he appears to believe that it is non-problematic because all Americans can understand what he's saying since it is, after all, a first-language American English accent, if a regional one. He does, however, believe that President Bush has problems with grammar—which is how he interprets much of the criticism of Bush's often awkward use of language—but seems convinced that if a man can become President with such “grammar” issues, then “grammar,” at least for the general American public, must be a less significant problem than having a foreign accent.

It is interesting to observe how little John's feelings on native speaker superiority change by the end of the research study. Almost a year later, John is still making the same arguments about native speakers with almost the same word choice:

First thing, you have to listen, right? Listen...how native people speaks. You know, if you want to do the *right* thing, you have to know the *right* way, right? If you mm if you know the *right* pronunciation of the, I mean if you know the *right*, um yeah, *right* pronunciation, how, how native speak pronounce the word, you know, so then you can practice and you get, um, you got feeling how, why, why your mmm how do I say? Why, I mean, why you, why your accent was *wrong* and how to *correct* it. (Interview 4, November 2004)

John's talk about native speaker versus second language speaker accents is still rife with words like "right" and "wrong;" in fact, he uses the word "right" four times in this short utterance to emphasize his point that native speakers' pronunciation is not only preferred but is the only truly *correct* pronunciation. Although he has lived in a primarily English-speaking environment for almost an additional year, John's perceptions of foreign accent and native accents still fall neatly into "wrong" and "right" categories.

### **Minimizing the Native Speaker Myth: The Path of Least Resistance**

While it is true that John's references to the native speaker myth and his own inability to live up to the expectations he believes native speakers have when they hear others speak English figure prominently in his discourse, he also uses a number of strategies to—consciously or

subconsciously—instantiate himself as a bona fide speaker of English. His “competent English speaker” identity appears at odds with the “deficit native speaker” identity he espouses at other times, but this internal contradiction is simply par for the course for an individual who has assumed so many different roles (teacher, student, employee, fiancée, religious convert, son, brother) in a different culture over a relatively few years. Identities are by nature sites of contestation, and the challenges of living in another culture and speaking a language that does not feel like one’s own will logically compound the tension surrounding one’s identity.

One idea John seems to focus on when talking about his language experiences is the level of importance he accords with communicating. For instance, while he is clear that his preference is *not* to speak English with a foreign accent, he responds in the following way to the question “is it okay to have a foreign accent?” (Interview 1, February 2004):

I think it’s okay. *If* you have no problem to *communicate* with people. Sometimes, *even* you, if you, *even* you have from the same country, you have, such as two, *two Chinese guys*, they are talking about something, they, they *even*, they *even* don’t understand each other. *If*, I think, if you can *communicate* with people very well, okay, that’s fine. Don’t worry about the accent very much. (Interview 1, February 2004).

Of course, John does spend a great deal of time qualifying the acceptability of having an accent—he uses “if” structures three times in this short excerpt—twice to set up the conditions under which an accent is acceptable and once to lay out a hypothetical situation which demonstrates his belief that even native speakers of the same language can have

misunderstandings. He emphasizes the normalcy and expectedness of having misunderstandings when two human beings—of whatever language background—are communicating, by using the adjective “even” four times. The sense of “even” John seems to be employing here is one of its less-frequently used meanings, “to suggest that some possibility constitutes an extreme case or an unlikely instance” (Random House Webster’s, 1999, p. 455). In other words, despite the fact that two people are native speakers from the same country and cultural background, they may not understand each other all the time, so it is no surprise that two people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds might run into misunderstandings as well. John’s example here is compelling, because it suggests that he sees little difference in the way native speakers and non-native speakers interact versus the way two native speakers interact. By comparing himself with native speakers who also have trouble communicating, he subverts the traditional native/non-native speaker paradigm which privileges the native speaker’s reactions as being the more acceptable in order to set native and non-native speakers on somewhat equal footing.

Another way John minimizes the power of the native speaker within an interaction is his use of the pronoun “you.” While much of the time, “you” is used as part of an imperative form, John appears to use it in many instances to mean “one,” so when he says “if you can communicate well,” he appears to be making a more general statement, meaning something like “if *one* can communicate well.” There may be a number of reasons why he chooses to use “you” instead of “one;” a number of articles suggest “you” is used to heighten the interactivity of a conversation and emphasize the participation of the listener (Kuo, 1999), but an article on the use of the second person pronoun *ni* in Mandarin suggest that the use of “you” may add an element of informality in Chinese as well (Kuo, 2003). Certainly the interview situation, while contrived, is

viewed as fairly informal by both parties, and thus this sense of Chinese-you informality translating to English-you informality is not farfetched. The sense of informality and interactivity which “you” conjures in this instance contributes to the erosion of the power of the native speaker myth; it puts John and the interviewer on equal footing by suggesting that misunderstandings like this one could happen to anyone—even the native speaker interlocutor—and therefore should not be surprising.

Despite his numerous hedgings and qualifying statements, however, at the heart of this excerpt is John’s belief that it *is* acceptable to have a foreign accent, as long as the ability to communicate is preserved. While this statement, however couched, first appears at odds with John’s earlier statements about native speakers’ ways of talking being “good,” and non-native speakers’ ways of talking being “wrong,” it does not blatantly contradict them. It merely demonstrates that what John privileges above all else is the ability to get one’s point across. It jives with his insistence that conveying one’s message and being understood is more important than the prestige he associates with a native-sounding accent.

In fact, utilitarian concerns appear to underlie other aspects of John’s supposed reliance on the myth of native speaker superiority and in so doing, complicate its power. For instance, John’s desire for a native-like accent may be based more on utilitarian concerns (for example, the hope that he will not have to explain or correct himself as much or will gain more prestige in the eyes of his peers) rather than a sense of shame on his part. His view of accent as a tool that might just make his life easier suggests more of a sense of agency, as if John is perceiving accent as one of

the ways he can empower himself or at least gain some measure of control over portions of his experience. Take, for example, this exchange between John and the researcher:

John: For me, ah, I want to have the American accent because when I came back to China, accent is more like American, it's easy for you *to associate with others*.

Interviewer: Back in China you mean or here?

J: China. Here, everybody can speak English. ((laughs))

I: So it gives you prestige?

J: Yeah, *people look up to you* in China (Interview 3, July 2004)

This excerpt presents an interesting twist on the myth of native speaker superiority, namely because instead of attempting to adopt or wanting to conform his accent to the expectations of native speakers, John wants to approximate their phonology because of the impact this will have on his relationship with his non-native speaker peers—at first he says it makes it “easy to associate with others” and by using the verb “associate” suggests an equal relationship that is simply enhanced by a more native-sounding accent. But when the interviewer introduces the idea of a native accent having a prestige factor, John takes it up, even rephrasing what she says by employing the idiom “to look up to,” which in this case implies that he will have higher status with an interlocutor who accords prestige to native-sounding accents. Now, it is certainly



possible that once again, John is merely mirroring back the native speaker interviewer's speech simply because she is a native speaker and therefore, at least for John, an authority, but the fact that he builds on the prestige concept by restating it suggests that he is not merely parroting phrases back to his interlocutor. In fact, when this conversation is seen alongside the many other conversations in which John clearly does state a preference for native speaker accents, it becomes clear that he believes having a more native-sounding accent would allow a Chinese national to exert some sense of superiority over his or her Chinese peers. This appropriation of the power of native speaker accents does not appear to do anything to undermine the myth, though—rather it seems that in some ways, it re-instantiates the concept that native = good and, conversely, non-native = bad. But the fact that it's being appropriated by a member of a group that has so often experienced the negative consequences of reliance on this myth is nonetheless interesting.

While John does recognize the social clout of having a more native-sounding accent, even among his international peers, his ideas about appropriateness and pragmatic concerns still figure prominently as a linguistic goal, and may even be his primary goal in language learning. In the following example he discusses his goals for his ESL education, and he explicitly states his interest in not concerning himself with his accent until more pragmatic concerns are taken care of:

John: I think for accent part, that should be a little bit later, because at first, mm you have to, *you have to learn* about situations

Interviewer: and vocabulary?

J: Yes

I: but for the accent part, when you say you want to know how Americans do things, do you mean you want to know how Americans say them? So that you can say them the same way?

J: Yeah, because to learn language is *to mimic*, you know, sometimes, you know, for me, when I heard people say *words I never heard about*, I think oh, that's pretty good and then I learned more *so I can say that kind of word in same situation*. I feel kind of, pretty good. . . *at first* what I'm trying, for me, what I'm worrying about is, is it *APPROPRIATE* to say that? You know, so I ask this question a lot. So for example, when I went, I want to talk with my boss, when I want to talk to other professors, I always 'is it *appropriate* to ask these questions?'...but I don't know. For me, *I have to* ask native speakers or native Americans is this *appropriate*? (Interview 3, July 2004)

By employing the phrase "at first," John turns the conversation away from accent two different times in this short passage so that he can make clear that his primary concerns are about practical matters of language instruction. While he does make mention of the fact that for him, language learning is about learning to "mimic" sounds, it's unclear that a mere exact repetition of the word (which is the way a native speaker is likely to use the word "mimic") is what he means. For instance, he goes on to talk about repeating or re-using words he has "never heard about,"

(rather than ones he's simply never *heard*, which might suggest pronunciation) which suggests that he's less concerned with how precisely to say the word and more concerned with knowing what the word is/what it means and how it is to be used—he points out that by hearing the word in a particular context, he will know in the future how to “say that kind of word in same situation.” Again, because word use is anchored in a specific situation and context, this statement suggests that his interest is in proper use and meaning rather than the finer points of pronunciation. This brings us to his insistence on being “appropriate,” a word he employs 3 different times in this short turn of talk. For John, the word “appropriate” appears cloaked in issues of face and authority, because he specifically mentions potential interlocutors who are authority figures, possibly the people who exert the most authority over him in the current phase of his life, his “boss” and “other professors.” His use of the modal “I have to” in reference to his self-imposed requirement to have native language users ‘check’ his discourse and ensure that he is using appropriate words and forms speaks volumes about his level of concern with respect to this issue. His use of such an intense modal reveals that he clearly feels compelled to seek out ‘expert’ help because the risks of saying the wrong thing to these authority figures is too high for him to simply muddle through and rely on his own instincts. While certainly he is negotiating his way through becoming a part of a very specific discourse community (physics), his focus on “appropriateness” seems more tied to issues of face and authority than to learning how to use words that most accurately describe what he is trying to do.

However, in the following passage, taken from his final interview, John demonstrates a measure of growth in his linguistic experience by explaining that he is no longer limited to relying on native speakers or other language experts to approve his linguistic choices as situationally and

culturally appropriate, since he has begun finding other ways he can hone his own instincts in terms of appropriate language.

John: Actually, it was hard for, at the beginning, I mean, 'cause, sometimes you just don't know how to start it, right, right? When you get, I mean, when you, when you know that, how to, I mean, start talking with people, how to say the: *general stuff*, so, I mean, that's enough, and then I think most of my (.) how, how do they say? I think my English was proven is because I watched TV every day. You know, I watch, um, *Friends*, *Everybody loves Raymond*,

Interviewer: Uh huh

J: everyday

I: And you think that's helping your English?

J: Yeah, because in these kind of soap, they're, they are talking about the *everyday stuff*, so you got . . . if you're just doing *ESL practice*, maybe you've got a little bit, I mean, progress, ah—*proven*. Well, I mean, you cannot, I mean, you cannot make BIG progress, big improvement in xxx English. (Interview 5, December 2004)

In this passage, John uses the somewhat vague phrases “everyday stuff” and “general stuff” to draw a distinction between “ESL practice,” or what he has learned in his ESL classes, and the conversational survival skills he needs to interact with Americans on a daily basis. While he still relies on native speakers (both the writers and actors featured in the television shows he watches) to teach him typical phrases, idioms and appropriate responses to talk, he is no longer dependent on having to request information from friends and acquaintances individually, but rather can employ his own analytical skills to glean this information from widely available resources, such as syndicated American television shows that air nightly on broadcast networks. He twice mentions that he believes his English skills have “proven,” which from the context he appears to use as the word ‘improvement,’ and this contributes to his growing confidence in using English.

John’s emphasis on gaining “practice” permeates his experience in the US. In fact, he notes that in his professional life, he often volunteers to be the one to place service calls specifically because he avails himself of opportunities to “practice” speaking English:

John: Now, yeah, I have to, because, you know I don’t have mm much chance to speak English *sometimes* I have to *sometimes* for MANY things, I think, if I have the chance to say it, I will *sometimes*, I *always* call mm, call the company, credit card company? or company of uh, electronics? something? yeah, you know. In the lab, sometimes we’ve gotta buy some lab stuff and you can, of course, you can bet online but I prefer to bet on phone.

Interviewer: Really, why?

J: Because I have the *chance to speak English* with people...then you practiced talk with people on the PHONE. I think that's pretty good. (Interview 3, July 2004.)

It's important to note that he twice defines the activity of calling vendors and creditors not by the stated purpose of the call (acquisition of goods, scheduling repairs, etc.) but as a "chance to speak English" By setting up an if-statement in which he shows himself taking advantage of a "chance" to use spoken English and by mitigating the number of times he says "sometimes" by switching to the adverb "always," John presents himself as a motivated, resourceful learner, seeking out any opportunity to speak English. He readily admitted at the beginning of the study that his main goal in participating was to get to practice English (though, evidently, not necessarily a native speaker, since he asked if the researcher was in fact a native speaker after the first interview).

John's initiative in purposefully calling to use spoken English to complete a task that could just as easily be completed online suggests that he has found an avenue of agency (not unlike his immersion in American television series) through which he can begin to steer his language experiences in the US context.

In addition to using these opportunities to speak English in real-world contexts as a pathway towards greater agency in language learning, John begins to develop strategies in the classroom that help foster his ability to construct himself as something other than a 'deficient native

speaker.’ Compare this excerpt from early November 2004 in which he discusses previous teaching experiences with the following one, which comes at the end of the same semester.

John: And you know, when I: got the evaluations from the student, oh, this sometimes I got the good, good, uh, I mean, e:h re, re, re

Interviewer: Report? [Or review?]

J: [yeah] But some, most of, most of them are kind of, little bit, (.) *tough*, you know.

I: Oh. What were they tough about? What did they say?

J: Oh, oh, I can’t understand what he said. ((laughs)) *Almost*, the bad part is *always* about, uh, language. If you’ve got, I think, well, right now I don’t think it’s a problem for me to communicate with those students.

I: So you think your-your English has, has improved?

J: Yeah, yeah. A lot. Well, you know, the first time is always tough. *You don’t have experience* (Interview 4, November 2004)

In this passage, we see John beginning to rely on his experience to help mitigate problems students may have with the way he speaks or uses English. While he softens the students' criticism of his language skills with neutralizing adverbial phrases like "kind of" and "little bit," he says their criticisms were still "tough" and that they were "almost...always" in reference to language and being unable to understand what John is saying. Interestingly, he does not only credit his improved facility with English but also suggests that simply having experience may help international teaching assistants feel more comfortable and competent in the US classrooms. These ideas are expanded in the following passage, in which John discusses negative evaluations from students as well as the various ways teaching assistants can respond to these students. It is a lengthy passage, but a revealing one:

John: You know, when I:: got the evaluation back and saw there are *a lot of um remarks* which said, "oh, I *don't know what this guy talking about*"

Interviewer: Mm hm

J: at ALL sometimes, you know

I: wow

J: if the students do not understand you, they will not ask you questions anymore.

Yeah. You know, sometimes I think um if you can make a good impression I



mean to the students, I remember *some students always* ask me questions, so because at the FIRST time I solved the problems they had,

I: Okay

J: They had, and so maybe they had good impression for you, and they just *keep asking* you. (Interview 5, December 2004)

In the first part of this scenario, John describes his ability to mitigate students' language expectations with his expertise in the subject matter, so while there were "a lot of remarks" which complained about his intelligibility, there were "some students" who "always" came back (or "keep asking") to John for answers because they were initially impressed by his expertise and willingness to help. So it seems that for certain students, John's accent or other language differences are not enough to compromise his ability to help them. But what of the others, the ones who insist that they "don't know what this guy talking about?" John responds to this scenario in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: But then you said there are SOME students if you don't make a good impression, they never ask you a question again.

John: Yeah, yeah, so you know, sometimes, the situation is kind of like a dilemma or something—dilemma?

I: Mm hmm, a dilemma.

J: Yeah, dilemma. Yeah, sometimes they got questions, so they raise their hands, but if you come there, they will (.) ((pantomimes dropping his hand))

I: put their hand down.

J: Put a hand down, so I mean, that's *pretty* (.) *embarrassing*.

I: Right

J: Yeah, so, sometimes you can remember those kind of students, so if they raise their hands, you can ((pantomimes looking away))

I: Ignore them?

J: Yeah, ignore them (Interview 5, December 2004).

This part of the interview is of particular interest not only because it details the kinds of strategies John employs in the classroom, but also because it is the section of the interview in which John employs the least verbal language, relying instead on pantomiming and repeating phrases the interviewer uses to describe what he is doing. It is almost as if John is, for the first time, having to find language to codify his experience in the classroom, and in particular to

describe his strategies for dealing with students whose treatment of him is, for him anyway, “pretty (.) embarrassing.” This behavior gives some credence to the claim that John is taking charge of his own experience and finding avenues where he can act instead of having to constantly maintain his role as the passive recipient of native speakers’ deficit labels. John does not explain or excuse students’ behavior by acknowledging that language difficulties may be part of the problem—and according to the myth of native speaker superiority, these language difficulties would all be on John’s part. Instead, he uses what power he has been accorded in the classroom to push back against the face-threat by simply refusing to acknowledge students who humiliate him. His resistance of his students’ rejection of him is not confrontational, but it is effective—he ignores them as they have ignored him.

John goes on to analyze students’ behavior even further in the talk that follows and begins a subtle shift towards the idea that students are not simply judges of language but, as engaged parties in the classroom, they are also—if not equally—responsible for the success of classroom interactions.

Interviewer: Do you think it’s, because it’s easier—if someone has an accent, it’s easier to understand them the longer you listen to them, so for instance, maybe you meet me, maybe the first time we meet, maybe you can’t understand my accent, but maybe after two or three times, maybe you start to under[stand my] accent better

John: [that’s true]

I: You think that's true?

J: Yeah, that's true. Because it seems like in that situation, it would be bad for the students because they never *get used to* your accent, so they never *get used to*, you know they never do *learn* [to understand]

I: [Yeah, I know.]

J: Yeah, you know I saw an article, maybe a long time ago in the newspaper at Penn State. Well, it said that mmm, for students, they *need to be more, I mean, more PATIENT*, and mo::re t[olerant]

I: [I saw that article]

J: Oh really?

I: More tolerant, more und[erstanding]

J: [yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah] I think *that's really important for us international teaching assistants*, you know? (Interview 5, December 2004).

In this passage, John begins to reveal his belief that there is a responsibility on the part of his undergraduate students to make an effort to understand him, just as he makes an effort to be clear and appropriate in his speech for their benefit. Phrases like “get used to” and “learn to understand” suggest that he recognizes that achieving consistent understanding with an L2 interlocutor is a process—most likely a gradual one—and that not going through this process could be “bad,” not just for him, but for his students as well. He describes students as somewhat lacking—in “need” of interpersonal qualities like patience and tolerance and situates these qualities in terms of their importance to him and his international teaching assistant peers. His insistence on his own group’s needs and his belief that undergraduates at least share some of the responsibilities of successful communication is further evidence of the increasing lack of prominence that the myth of the native speaker holds for John. If the ideology of native speaker superiority was a guiding metaphor for John, one might expect to see all—or most—of his experiences filtered through this myth. One might not expect him to place any of the communicative burden on his interlocutor, especially one who is a native speaker.

If John’s reliance on the myth of native speaker superiority were as great at the first section of this analysis suggests, one might also expect John to look to his own accent as the source of real-time misunderstandings when they occur. The following excerpt was recorded during a typical part of John’s day as he prepares to assist his advisor with a class, and this exchange becomes part of a stimulated recall during his second session with the interviewer in April 2004:

John ((enters a room where a machine is running)): Hey, ((name)) have you seen Peter’s /pæns/?

Colleague: What?

J: Have you seen Peter's /pæns/?

Colleague ((shuts off machine)): You mean like to write?

J: yeah

Colleague: no, I haven't seen them (Daily recording, February 2004)

Because the vowel in the word “pens” sounds very much like /æ/ and not /ɛ/ to the interviewer and because John’s colleague both turns off the machine he is using and clarifies the word (“You mean like to write?”), she assumed that this vowel difference might be the source of misunderstanding. Before suggesting this explanation, however, she first asked John what he thought had occurred. He first asked, “Is that cause my accent or-?” which, considering how much of his conversations with the interviewer focus on accent and language, demonstrates his recognition that even if *he* doesn’t feel accent was an issue in this situation that it certainly is a consideration for the interviewer. The conversation continued:

Interviewer: Well, I don’t know, I mean, do you feel that maybe was it because he didn’t understand the word or...?

John: Yeah, because you know in the lab, *we* never talk about, *nobody* will talk about pens, you know, what *we* are talking about—just the lab stuff, mm, no pen. (.). So when I ask her, ask him ‘did you find pen—did you see his pens? Peter’s pens?’ *he was*, maybe *it’s kind of confusing* about it (Interview 2, April 2004)

What is so interesting about this passage is that despite John’s long insistence that his accent is a primary source of misunderstanding, he rejects this explanation as a possibility here. He focuses instead on the pragmatics of the situation and the unlikelihood that a person would walk into a lab and ask for pens. He is careful to not place blame on any one individual; he starts to say “he was confused” but switches midsentence to the more impersonal “it was confusing.” He also uses “we” and “nobody” to demonstrate that this lack of expectation extended to all members of the lab and not simply to this one individual. This explanation is one which a native speaker would likely employ and recalled to mind an anecdotal but interesting incident a colleague related: while in a coffee shop, this colleague pulled out a checkbook and began writing her check when the clerk said “I love your /pIn/.” My colleague looked down at her checkbook and said “Well, I think it’s a Bic™,” and the cashier pointed to the cameo on her lapel and said “I love your /pIn/.” Because my colleague was writing a check, she anticipated the clerk’s comments to pertain to the activity in which she was engaged, and thus simply did not expect to field a compliment on her jewelry. And because in some American dialects /pɛn/ and /pɪn/ sound very similar, my colleague’s first reaction was to look to context clues as a co-referent and not to the specific formation of the vowel in “pen/pin.” This incident dovetails nicely with John’s experience and explanation: he simply explains this incident the way a native speaker might,

instead of defaulting to an assumption that his non-native pronunciation was the locus of the problem.

### **Conclusion: The Struggle Continues**

One final excerpt that might serve as a keystone to John's developing his identity as a competent L2 speaker and not as a deficit non-native speaker is the support he is able to glean from authority figures, notably his advisor whom he always refers to as his "boss." For instance, when asked about comments he has received about his accent, he notes that while his ESL teachers have "told me there's some words I have to:::, mm, have to focus" he quickly adds that "my boss said okay your accent is very good" (Interview 1, February 2004). John's choice to follow his ESL teacher's comments (which can be seen as representing the institutional structures that situate him as a foreign-accented, if not a deficient non-native, speaker) with a reiteration of his advisor's approval of his accent is noteworthy: while his advisor, by the very nature of the word John uses to refer to him (John consistently calls him his "boss"), is certainly an authority figure and is clearly attached to the university structure, he is also seen, in this case, anyway, as providing legitimacy for John's attempt to resist being positioned solely by virtue of his accent. In fact, it is likely *because* of John's advisor's position of authority both in the department and in the university as a whole that John draws on his comment to resist being positioned as foreign simply because of the way he speaks. He uses his advisor's approval, one might argue, to speak back to Lorde's (1984) exhortation that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 99). In being ratified by an individual he considers to be an authority both as a speaker of English and as a force in his professional life, John is again using the myth of native speaker superiority to his advantage. While his commoditization of this myth



for his own purposes certainly doesn't necessarily dilute the myth's power, it does allow him to use it to demonstrate a sense of agency. Ultimately, John's fractured and intermittent allegiance to and challenging of the power of the native speaker paints a picture of an identity that is multifaceted and always in flux. He is at once a mouthpiece for this myth and at the same time a megaphone calling for a newer, more precise and more responsible way of talking with and about L2 speakers of English. His experiences shed a great deal of light on the challenge that it is to be a foreign-accented speaker living and working in the US academic community, and his constant grappling with agency and constraint is a place where language teachers can begin to better understand their students as well as their responsibilities as educators.

## CHAPTER IV: SHADOW'S CASE

### **Background and Introduction**

Shadow is a Chinese woman in her early 20s who came to a large, mid-Atlantic R1 University to pursue a PhD in mathematics. Her husband, Xian Sheng, accompanied her, initially as her dependent but then gained acceptance to another graduate program at the same university. Shadow's schooling is fairly typical of others of her generation in China—she first learned English in school at age 12 and lessons began by having children memorize “some words and sentence pattern” (Interview 1, February 2004), which apparently meant that they were to memorize lists of words and grammar rules. There was also occasional feedback from the teacher on children's pronunciation, but since classes were large, individual interaction and instruction was limited. When Shadow arrived in the US, she was tested on her pronunciation of American English and placed in a series of ESL classes to complete before she was allowed to assume teaching responsibilities. When she was recruited for this study, Shadow was in the second of the three classes during the spring term of 2004. She finished her ESL requirements over the summer term and was given two classes to teach in the fall.

### **Dependent, partner, teacher: shifting roles in marriage**

Shadow's relationship with her husband Xian Sheng appears to influence almost every aspect of her experience in the US. At the beginning of the first interview, she explains that they decided to get married when she was accepted into the university's math program so that he could come with her. During the first few months of the study, he gained acceptance into the Computer Science program at the university, but he initially started his stay in the US as

Shadow's "dependent" (Interview 1, February 2004). She explains in the first interview that they felt very fortunate that Xiang Sheng was able to obtain a dependent's visa to come: "I'm lucky, yes, I know . . . Actually, if he, if my husband CAN'T come here, come here, maybe I, uh, maybe I: . . . I won't come here" (Interview 1, February 2004). This explanation is telling, because her use of an if-clause demonstrates the extent to which she depends on him: grammatically and figuratively, she is dependent on him—she cannot imagine living abroad without his being there.

In addition to her emotional connection, Shadow has a pragmatic interest in Xian Sheng's accompanying her to the US. The first time Shadow was interviewed, she and the interviewer spoke together easily for over an hour. At their second meeting, however, Xian Sheng was present and quickly took on the role of 'interpreter' for Shadow. The interviewer would ask a question, and Shadow would turn to her husband and answer in Chinese, and he would then translate the answer for the interviewer. When asked in the second interview why this had occurred, Shadow explained:

Shadow: Eh, ACTUALLY, sometimes if I (.) if I talk with (.) you (.) by myself, uh, I can try my best to: (.) to: (.) to talk with you but if he ((laughs)) be with me ((laughs)) so, I-I *tend to* u:m (.) *depend* on him

Interviewer: Do you think that he prefers that you depend on him or do you think that he prefers that you do it by yourself?

S: I think he (2.0) it doesn't matter (.) but he, maybe he (.) he, he will feel (.)  
*comfortable* that I depend on him but he also (.) *hope* I can improve my English  
((laughs)) (Interview 2, April 2004).

In this excerpt, Shadow explains the symbiotic nature of her relationship with her husband; when she is with him, she prefers that he speak for her, and in return he feels “comfortable” (though that small pause before the word “comfortable” might suggest she was looking for a similar word, like *comforted*) with her reliance on him. In addition, her use of the verb phrase “tend to” and its link to the word *tendency* suggests that she is predisposed to rely on him in situations where they are together—almost as if this reliance is her default state. However, it seems clear that Xian Sheng is also interested in Shadow’s becoming more comfortable with speaking English—here she says he “hopes” she can improve, but later is more forceful, explaining that “he he think I should be better ((laughs))” (Interview 4, December 2004). Her use of the modal “should” suggests a sense of obligation on Shadow’s part to become more proficient with English, which reveals Xian Sheng’s interest in her continued improvement in and comfort with speaking English.

Another striking aspect of much of Shadow’s talk is the extent to which laughter figures in her utterances. Vettin and Todt (2004) have suggested that in US culture, laughter during conversations is used to “regulate the flow or interaction and to mitigate the meaning of the preceding utterance” (p. 93), and it seems likely that laughter functions in a similar way for Shadow. She is extremely self-conscious about her proficiency with speaking English, and her laughter often follows an evaluative statement about herself. The first occurrence of laughter in

the excerpt above follows an utterance in which she confesses to relying on her husband to communicate in English for her, which, while not an evaluative statement per se, certainly reveals a habit that Shadow is not particularly proud of. She also laughs after the statements “he, he think I should be better” and “he hope I can improve my English” (Interview 4, December 2004 and Interview 2, April 2004). Because both of these statements address Shadow’s proficiency (or lack thereof) in English and her husband’s desire that she become more fluent and comfortable speaking English, it is likely that Shadow’s laughter is attempting to downplay the face-threat she feels in admitting that her husband wants her to change her English-speaking habits.

Interestingly, Shadow’s husband’s proficiency with English serves other less pragmatic functions as well. In the following excerpt, she explains his role in shaping her view of herself as a language learner.

Shadow: Actually, before, before I came here, I don’t know I have many mistake, I have mistake in about my pronunciation, just like TH sound, think or very, V sound. Mm, but NOW I know that, but it’s difficult for me to . . . to correct it, but I, I want try.

Interviewer: How did you, how did you learn that this was a problem? Did someone tell you?

S: Yes, the instructor in, the, ah, the last, in the last semester I, I have taken ESL 115, 115 (.) yes, *the instructor told us*. And also in, in this semester in 117, *the instructor told us* too.

I: Has anyone OTHER than your teachers ever said anything about your pronunciation of English, like your advisor or other students, or friends maybe?

S: *My husband told me*.

I: What does he say?

S: Um, uh, he say, he said, my pronunci, pronunciation is *bad*. Yes, ACTUALLY his, HIS English is good, is better than me, um . . . because, because he has more interesting in English, so and his pronunciation is *good*, uh (.) uh

I: Does he ever correct you?

S: yes. *Because he is my husband, I, ((laughs)) I, I sometimes I, I mm, I didn't re-re-re (.) receipt his advice*

I: Whenever your husband does say “you should say this in a different way,” how does it make you feel? Is it funny? Do you kinda laugh about it or does it, does it make you feel bad? Or?

S: eh, actually *now* I ((laughs)) I ((laughs)) I don't ((still laughing)) I'm customed to ((laughs)) . . . Actually, *now I know* where I, I can pronounce, pronounce correctly (.) but (.) oh, oh, also I know, know HOW to pronounce it uh when I speak (.) a little (.) quickly or (.) ah, I can't pay attention to pronunciation, because I ah I think about to use which words, and which sentence. It's difficult to me...and when I reading some (.) papers, I (1.0) I u::m, (.) it's better (Interview 1, February 2004).

One interesting concept this passage reveals is the destabilizing effect that the couple's disparate proficiencies with English has on their relationship. While Shadow has demonstrated over and over again that she recognizes that her husband's comfort level and communicative abilities in English surpass her own, she still finds it difficult to accept his corrections to her pronunciation. Since Shadow's discourse is filled with references to Xian Sheng's facility in using English, it would not appear that she rejects his help because she feels his language abilities are not up to par. It seems far more likely that she is rejecting his attempts to take on the role of teacher versus protector/provider. Her use of the phrase "because he is my husband" highlights Xian Sheng's role as a partner and spouse and not as a teacher. Her use of the word "recept" (which likely means "receive" and is drawn from the word "reception") is telling because it suggests a common understanding of the teacher-student dyad, in which the teacher has knowledge to bestow upon the student who acts almost as a vessel, simply storing the knowledge until it needs to be accessed. While this image may be a common one, it lays out a significant power differential between the teacher, who has the knowledge, and the student, who wants the

knowledge. Shadow admits wholeheartedly that she must “depend on him” (Interview 2, April 2004) for translation and other household-related matters, and perhaps ratifying his authority by allowing him to take on the “teacher” role simply feels like she is ceding too much autonomy, so she rejects his advice. She has, in fact, sensitized herself to areas in which she can use new linguistic strategies and so can, in some ways, be her own teacher of sorts.

Again, too, laughter is a prominent feature of this conversation, as it follows a number of possibly face-threatening statements in which her husband is making some kind of assessment of her English abilities or is making some correction to her spoken English. After Shadow explains that her husband believes her pronunciation to be “bad,” she laughs when she admits that he does correct her pronunciation. Her laughter continues in her next utterance, after the interviewer asks her how this correction makes her feel; she starts by saying “I don’t” but then follows up with the fact that she is “customed to it,” possibly inferring she has gotten used to his corrections, but perhaps does not respond to them. Whatever the case, it is compelling that her laughter, which has infused the conversation about her husband’s corrections to her spoken English, virtually stops once she shifts topics to explain what she feels she is now able to do on her own. Shadow marks the transition from Xian Sheng’s opinions to her own abilities with the phrase “Now I know” and begins to explain what she is able to do—she can pronounce correctly. Even when she finds areas where she is still weak—as in when she is speaking quickly and cannot monitor her pronunciation—she does not laugh. Possibly this is because she is more comfortable making statements about herself versus reacting to the assessments of others, especially someone she has seen as her equal and peer like her husband.



This passage also illustrates a number of Shadow's understandings about language; first, she uses the phrase "before I came here" to divide her past into two different eras: the time when she thought her pronunciation of English was adequate, and the time after she arrives in the US, when she begins to believe that her pronunciation is problematic. In addition, the phrase "I don't know I have many mistake" is in the present tense, which may mean one of two things: one, that she is simply not conscious of the fact that she is using present tense or two, that she is intentionally leaving things in the present tense because she believes that she currently still has "many mistake" in her pronunciation of English. While the literature has documented the difficulties Chinese L1 speakers have in using English tenses, it is clear that Shadow does use the simple past ("My husband told me," "the instructor told us" and "He said"), and so it seems likely that whether she is consciously using the present tense or not, its occurrence here suggests that she feels these problems with English are ongoing.

### **The Native Speaker: The "Third Domestic Partner?"**

Since the focus of this exploration has been centered on the myth of native speaker superiority and its interaction with participants' senses of themselves, it is important to examine the way Shadow's relationship with her husband reveals and is colored by her views of the native speaker. The sense of power Shadow accords to the native speaker is perhaps not the dominant theme of her interactions about her husband, but it does appear in much of her talk about her sense of herself as a speaker of English. Like John, her identity in English is slippery and fractured, often appearing to contradict itself—one moment she seems to wholeheartedly embrace the myth of native speaker superiority and then appears to be undermining it in the next. Often, her husband figures as a kind of bridge between her and a native speaker interlocutor (as

in her interactions with the researcher, wherein her husband became a de facto translator), which suggests that as the more proficient speaker of English, he is endowed with the power and ability to filter conversational responses. Furthermore, Shadow does appear to correlate power with level of language ability—she situates her husband in a position of control by making him an informal translator because she perceives him as being a better speaker of English (which, for her, means that he is more comprehensible to native speakers and sounds more like a native speaker than she does), but she shows a great deal of discomfort with any attempt at his taking on an instructional role. Shadow’s laughter punctuates nearly every statement she makes about her husband’s perception of her English speaking abilities, and the discomfort this non-humorous laughter represents is a clear indication of her disinclination to allow her husband to take on the more powerful role of a teacher. While I am not suggesting that Shadow has neatly defined hermeneutic categories that equate an individual’s language ability level with positions of perceived discursive power, it does seem clear that she is comfortable with her husband’s taking on a slightly more powerful role of translator because of his more native-like language abilities but shows real uncertainty about his taking on a more instructive—and thus more discursively powerful—role. However, Shadow’s complicated categorization schema *does* appear to allow a non-native speaker to take on a teacherly role—she mentions a Chinese ESL teacher she has had as a role model more than once and explains both her confidence in and comfort with the role of teacher being played by this Chinese woman. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Shadow’s view of the native speaker is as complicated as her view of herself.

## **The Non-native Speaker: responsibility, power and the discursive “other”**

One area in which some of Shadow’s beliefs about language emerge most compellingly is in her statements about interactions with other people, specifically American native speakers. She appears to grapple with a sense of who is responsible for the interaction and what her role should be as a non-native speaker. In this excerpt, her exclusive use of I-statements suggests that she feels the bulk of the conversational burden must fall to her when the interviewer asks her about miscommunications:

Interviewer: Which do you think is the reason the most often?

Shadow: Mm (.) maybe the (.) maybe because *I can’t find* the exact word and when *I* speak English ((laughs)) I, I mm *I can’t pay attention* to the grammar (.) yes (Interview 2, April 2004).

In this excerpt, what Shadow does not say is as noteworthy as what she does say. She does not suggest that the success of an interaction is in any way the responsibility of a native speaker interlocutor, but places the onus solely on her own shoulders—she uses the pronoun “I” in three separate statements about her role in the interaction. Additionally, she employs the modal verb “can’t” in two separate instances (as opposed to “won’t” or “shouldn’t”) which suggests it is her ability that is lacking instead of her willingness. This suggestion that she is incapable of—rather than unwilling to— “find[ing] the exact right word” or “pay[ing] attention to the grammar” contributes, however subtly, to the notion that she as a non-native speaker is working from a ‘deficit’ identity.

Shadow builds on this sense of non-native speaker inferiority in other ways as well. Consider this answer she gave in a questionnaire she completed in July of 2004:

Question: What's the most difficult part about speaking English? Why?

Answer: I think the most difficult part is that I *can't find the proper words and sentences to express myself*. Because *I felt very sorry that I made other people confused* but I couldn't do anything. Although my pronunciation was not *exact* at most time, I could repeat and speak slowly and other people usually could understand me (Questionnaire, July 2004).

Again, a number of linguistic factors work together in this excerpt to create an image of Shadow—and non-native speakers in general—that conforms to the myth of native speaker superiority. As with the last interaction, she uses a number of I-statements which build on the idea that she alone is responsible for the success—or lack thereof—of an interaction with other English speakers. The construction of the sentence “I felt very sorry that I made other people confused” is striking as well; she does not use the passive construction “other people were confused” but rather “I *made* other people confused” (emphasis added), suggesting that her interlocutors’ confusion is not simply a byproduct of two communicators interacting but is almost an act of will on her part—she “made” (or created) their confusion. Shadow also employs two adjectives, “exact” and “proper,” to provide an evaluation of her efforts—presumably, if her own words are *not* “proper” and her pronunciation is *not* “exact,” there exists a speaker—the idealized native speaker—whose use of English *is* both exact and proper.

She uses the word “exact” in another excerpt as well, and continues to rely on complex grammatical structures to convey her sense of herself as a deficit speaker:

Shadow: sometimes, I (.) I can *let other people understand me* but I can't use *exact* words and I, I can't use *exact* sentence, uh . . . even some, some point words, but ((laughs)) *other people is very clever and they can understand me* u::h . . . yes (Interview 1, February 2004).

Again, Shadow's use of the word “exact” to explain what her use of English is *not* is striking, but even more so is her construction “I can let other people understand me” which again suggests that control of the interaction is solely her responsibility. In addition, her two-time use of the phrase “other people” is interestingly vague—does she mean native speakers, other non-native speakers, or does she lump all interlocutors into the same camp? Whichever she means, her compulsion to label these “other people” as needing to be “very clever” in order to understand her is also telling, as it suggests that mere facility with the language may not be enough to understand a non-native speaker's talk but that understanding a speaker like herself also requires some access of deeper cognitive abilities. The verb “let,” however, is an interesting choice, because while it adds to Shadow's sense of responsibility, its semantic sense of offering permission or allowing an activity to take place suggests that she has a kind of control over the interaction that appears at odds with the self-effacing nature of the rest of her talk.

A final excerpt in which she discusses her interactions with “other people”—and one which suggests that “other people” for her refers to Americans/native speakers—once again posits Shadow as the cause of miscommunication.

Shadow: sometimes I found mm, *because of my pronunciation*, (.) other people  
CAN'T understand me

Interviewer: and that can be frustrating

S: yeah, but *Chinese people ((laughs)) can understand me*. (Interview 1, February  
2004).

Again, by employing a dependent “because” clause in the first utterance, Shadow uses language to imply that “other people” (who, it becomes clear, are most likely American native speakers) are unable to decipher her speech because of something she does—she locates the responsibility for the success of the interaction solely on herself. Interestingly, however, she mitigates the power of this statement by admitting that “Chinese people” (who are clearly *not* “other people”) can, in fact, understand her, pronunciation notwithstanding. While she does laugh at this statement, which serves to dampen its impact somewhat, it serves to clearly delineate her world of interlocutors into “Chinese people” (who understand her) and “other people” (who, because of her own failings, do not). The dichotomy these phrases establish, while bolstering her connection to her own group (“Chinese people”), underscores the distance Shadow places between the native speaker population and herself. One effect of this polarization is the amount of power accorded to the native speaker. Interestingly, this power manifests itself in very different ways for Shadow than it has for other participants. For instance, Shadow seems, of all the participants in this study, to be the most concerned with native speakers’ *emotional* response to her and her language abilities. She appears to harbor concerns that native speakers’ responses to her are not

genuine and are simply a result of politeness, and this preoccupation with native speakers' needs gives them a great deal of discursive power.

### **The Emotional Collateral of Native Speakers**

In this excerpt, Shadow's uncertainty about and concern over native speakers' feelings towards her surface in interesting—if subtle—ways:

Shadow: I think mm, uh I mean uh u::h, at the, the people who: who is, uh the people, I mean, ((laughs)) the people who are not Chinese and can speak Chinese, all, *even* he can speak a little word, it's em, (.) I will feel very happy.

Interviewer: Why? Why does that make you happy?

S: U::h, mm, because, because I think he, he know, he is interested, interested at, *interested in China* and he, maybe he wanted to know more, more of Chinese.

I: Do you feel Americans feel that way when you speak English? That they're happy, (.) *even if* you don't say it exactly right?

S: I-I found that *many American people is very nice, even* I, I can't speak well, I can't speak English well, (.) um, they don't care, they don't care and they, they will um . . . they will sp, sometimes I can't understand other people, they, they

will speak very, very slowly and uh . . . mm (.) *uh but I don't know what they FEEL. ((laughs)) . . . because they are very nice* to (Interview 1, February 2004).

In this excerpt, Shadow reveals a number of interesting concepts. For instance, the fact that she follows a statement about Americans being “nice” with “even” suggests that her expectation was that Americans would not otherwise be “nice” to a non-native speaker of English. Despite the fact that Shadow uses “even” to mean “even if” in the first utterance and the interviewer repeats this construction in her own question, it seems clear that Shadow’s use of “even” in the final utterance means “even though.” This is perhaps a subtle difference, but not an insignificant one, for if Shadow were employing “even” as “even if,” the conditional construction of this phrase would suggest that her ability to speak English well is unknown—maybe she can speak it well, maybe she can’t, but either way, Americans are nice. But because so much of Shadow’s other discourse plays out her assertion that she does *not* speak English well, it is probably safe to assume that she means “even though” which might be seen as “an emphatic form of *although*” (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999: 554).

This statement is significant because it suggests that Shadow does not expect Americans to be “nice” to non-native speakers of English—that a person’s inability to speak English well in fact *means that* Americans do not have to treat them kindly. In addition, Shadow’s later statement that “I don’t know what they FEEL ((laughs)) . . . because they are very nice” suggests that she believes this niceness to be superficial or insincere; in other words, she so fully expects Americans to treat her badly (or at least not “nicely”) that she does not know what to do with the fact that they do treat her nicely, but she certainly isn’t going to accept it as evidence that she is



liked/cared for/accepted by her American interlocutors. In fact, the because-construction she employs here suggests that the “very nice” behavior of these interlocutors masks their real feelings about her—in other words, because she does not believe her interlocutors are sincere in their nice-ness, they must be using this kindly behavior to disguise their true feelings.

It is difficult, however, to ascertain Shadow’s expectations about the ways native speakers treat non-native speakers. In the next passage from a questionnaire she completed in July of 2004, she explains her impressions of Americans (which again, for her, are synonymous with “native speakers”), and reveals a number of complicated beliefs about her important but often confusing interactions with them:

Question: What do you think most Americans think about your accent? Why do you think this?

Answer: Most Americans couldn’t understand me sometimes *because of my accent*, but they are *very patient to me*. I feel very *sorry about* my accent. Maybe some people don’t like to talk with me but they think they *should be* polite to me. Maybe some people *really* like to help me and encourage me to speak English.

*Actually* I’m not sure about that. (Questionnaire, July 2004).

Again, Shadow’s positioning of herself vis-à-vis her native speaking interlocutors is a compelling illustration of what she believes her role in these conversations to be. It is *her* accent that is the cause of misunderstandings with Americans—she demonstrates this with a simple because-clause, which sets up a simplistic explanation for miscommunications: She states their

misunderstanding with a clear effect-type statement: “Americans couldn’t understand me” and offers as its cause: “my accent.” She also uses the modal verb “couldn’t” instead of “can’t” or “don’t”—this is an interesting choice, as the verb “could” suggests an intentionality on the part of the subject that would not have been present in “do” or “can.” The effect of this choice is an impression that perhaps Americans want to understand her but are simply impeded by her accent. She continues with the conjunction “but,” which again, is an interesting choice, because it indicates a “violation of reasonable expectations” in which what is expected after the first clause is contradicted by information in the second (Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman 1999:475). The clause that sets up the expectation is “Americans couldn’t understand me” and the clause that contains supposedly contradictory information is “they are very patient to me.” To precede this statement with “but” rather than “and” suggests that Americans’ patience in this scenario is unanticipated and does not jive with Shadow’s expectations. Perhaps her feelings here harken back to her reliance on her husband’s ease in conversing and perceived facility in making himself understood; in having him speak for her, she can avoid testing the “patience” of her native speaker interlocutors.

Even the statement about Americans’ unexpected patience is loaded with ideology: Note that in the statement “they are very patient to me,” Americans are patient *to* Shadow, not *with* her. Her choice of preposition here suggests a projection from one speaker to another: Americans project patience her way, in other words, rather than demonstrating patience *with* her, a preposition which suggests more shared engagement and that the two interlocutors are on more even footing. Now, certainly, as with many other grammatical choices, one could argue that Shadow’s choice of the preposition “to” versus “with,” which is the more common idiomatic construction, is

merely evidence of her non-native use of English grammar. This may well be, but whether or not it is intentional, it aligns nicely with the thrust of the utterance as a whole: when she employs “patient *to*,” the sense of one interactant controlling the amount of patience in a conversation and how it is distributed is much stronger than it might be had she chosen “patient *with*” instead.

The final three sentences in this excerpt are of particular interest: “Maybe some people don’t like to talk with me but they think they *should be* polite to me. Maybe some people *really* like to help me and encourage me to speak English. *Actually* I’m not sure about that” Her use of the modal “should” in the statement “they think they should be polite to me” demonstrates a sense of external (possibly societal or cultural) obligation that exerts a coercive influence on “some people” and motivates them to perform acts they do not wish to do. In other words, people don’t want to talk to her, but—again, she uses “but” to indicate a clause that contradicts expectations—these “people” feel obliged to be polite. In the next sentence, she activates the idea that in fact some of her native speaker interlocutors do, in fact, “really like to help me and encourage me to speak English” but follows it immediately with the adversative connector “actually.” Cheng & Warren (2001), in a discourse study of non-native speakers’ use of the word *actually*, suggest that it introduces a “personal point of view” which in this case reveals “something unexpected,” namely, that Shadow doesn’t necessarily believe that she truly understands the motives of the people with whom she is conversing (p. 272).

An exploration of Shadow’s concept of native speakers’ “patient” behavior provides additional insights into her ideologies about native/non-native speaker interactions. She explains her feelings about this attitude in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: Okay. Do you think the other people should TRY to understand you?

Do you think they ha::ve a responsibility to be: patient?

Shadow: Yes, people are very patient.

I: They are, I know they are, but do they HAVE to be? Do you think it's RIGHT for them to be patient?

S: Mm. (4.0) *It's hard to say ((laughs))* But I (.) mm . . . I think because we are international students, *we, we study here, we should improve our English. It's . . . it's OUR responsibility. We don't uh (.) we don't depend on other peoples (.) I mean, um (.) other peop—other student don't have, (.) don't need to (.) don't have responsibility to: (.) to be patient with us.* (Interview 2, April 2004).

A number of noteworthy things happen in this small excerpt of talk. First, Shadow reiterates a claim she has made previously, that “people are very patient,” but then she is asked two different questions about these speakers—whether they “have to” be patient and whether or not it is “right” for them to be patient. The use of the modal “have to” in the first question addresses the extent to which these speakers are reacting to a sense of an external requirement (possibly enacted via societal or cultural pressure), while use of the word “right” suggests the extent to which this behavior conforms to some standard of “what is good, proper or just” (dictionary.com). In essence, then, the first question asks Shadow to what extent she believes

these speakers are reacting to a sense of obligation or external pressure, and the second asks her to make something of a judgment about the properness of this behavior. Shadow responds by hedging (“Mm”) and then pausing for a full 4 seconds before saying “It’s hard to say,” which allows her to answer the question without really having to say whether this behavior is, in fact, right or wrong. This statement is followed by laughter, which serves to mitigate it even more, and because Shadow then goes on to address the responsibility or more obligation-related question, it is not difficult to conclude that her initial uncertainty and hedging was her attempt to answer the question—or rather, to avoid answering the question—about this behavior being “right.” Perhaps Shadow shies away from answering this question because it demands a personal judgment about the goodness or virtue in a person’s behavior, and Shadow does not feel such a judgment is appropriate on her part.

In any case, though, she sidesteps the question of rightness and speaks instead to the sense of obligation. She begins by explaining what she believes is the non-native speaker’s role—she uses several iterations and repetitions of third person pronouns (“we” and “our”) to indicate her solidarity with and ability to speak for this group. She says “because *we* are international students, *we*, *we* study here, *we* should improve *our* English. It’s . . . it’s *OUR* responsibility. *We* don’t uh (.) *we* don’t depend on other peoples.” She employs a because-clause to demonstrate the reasons she feels that she and her non-native speaking cohorts shoulder this burden: because they are “international students”—in other words, people who have chosen to go abroad and live in a second language environment to pursue studies—and because they “study here,” again restating and emphasizing the fact that she and her peers have made a choice to pursue their educations *in the United States*. The intentionality on the part of these students to come to the US and study is

the reason, then, that “we should improve our English.” Again, Shadow uses the modal “should,” which suggests compulsion or obligation in a way that other modal verbs, like “can” or “might” or “could” do not. Thus she sets up a neat cause/effect statement, in which the students’ efforts to improve their spoken English are a logical outcome of their choice to come and study in the US. Her increased volume on the word “our” in the sentence “it’s OUR responsibility” emphasizes her contention that non-native speakers alone bear this responsibility—or at least the bulk of it. She finishes her statement by again employing an interesting use of modality: she explains that “we *don’t depend* on other peoples.” Again, she uses “don’t” as opposed to a choice like “shouldn’t” or “can’t;” the use of “don’t” here, intended or not, suggests a demonstration of fact—it simply isn’t done, and whether this is because of a sense of obligation (as would be suggested by “shouldn’t”) or because permission or the ability to do so has been denied (as would be suggested by “can’t”) is unknown.

Shadow’s repeated use of the discursive pattern in which she posits a statement, followed by a foreshadowing adversative connector (such as “but” or “even though”), followed by another statement that is contradictory to the expectations of the first is employed repeatedly in her talk about native speakers: In the previous excerpt, she uses this pattern in the statement: “*many American people is very nice, even I, I can’t speak well, I can’t speak English well*” (Interview 1, February 2004); she uses it again twice in his excerpt, first in the sentence “Most Americans couldn’t understand me sometimes *because of my accent*, but they are *very patient to me*” and then in the last three statements, the first of which follows the pattern exactly, “Maybe some people don’t like to talk with me but they think they *should be* polite to me” and the last two which work together to create the same sense of statement-of-fact → adversative connector →

statement-of-facts-contradicting-expectations: “Maybe some people *really* like to help me and encourage me to speak English. *Actually* I’m not sure about that” (Questionnaire, July 2004).

### **Discursive patterns and Native Speakers’ Emotional collateral**

What emerges from her talk is that Shadow does not believe she knows what native speakers truly think about her, and she does not believe she can rely on their behavior to give her clues, and so she exists in an environment of uncertainty and hesitation. She is confused as to why her native speaker interlocutors treat her politely, which suggests that she does not expect this kind of treatment for non-native speakers. Because of the importance Shadow appears to place on her native speaker interlocutor’s reactions and emotions, these speakers are endowed with a kind of discursive collateral. Shadow repeatedly expends a significant amount of conversational energy explaining that she does not know what her native speaker counterparts really feel about her. The fact that she discusses this situation at all, let alone on several different occasions, seems to suggest that it is something she spends a significant amount of time thinking about. Shadow’s reserved and taciturn conversational style during the course of this study suggests that when she does choose to speak about something, it is because she feels strongly about it. Shadow’s intense focus on her native speaker counterparts’ feelings about her accords them a position of some power and control. A great deal of Shadow’s talk is invested in demonstrating the superiority of the native speaker’s command of English and her own inability to achieve this same standard.

### **The shifting balance of power: unintended consequences of uncertainty**

While it is clear that Shadow believes that the communicative burden in a native speaker/non-native speaker interaction should be shouldered by the non-native speaker, the instability encoded in her frequent employment of this statement-of-fact → adversative connector → statement-of-facts-contradicting-expectations pattern also, oddly enough, may serve to dilute somewhat the power of the native speaker as well. The pattern suggests that Shadow questions the intentions behind the statements these speakers make and refuses to take them at face value. This uncertainty about trusting one's interlocutor can shift the balance of power in a very fundamental—if very subtle—way. Interactions only work because both parties accept, to some degree at least, the sincerity of their interlocutors and their commitment to mean what they say. When this basic tenet of conversation is undermined by one participant's skepticism or bafflement, the balance of power can shift subtly to the side of the skeptical interactant, because now—whether he/she knows it or not—the untrusted interactant must work a bit harder to establish her/his credibility. So while Shadow in many ways serves as a persuasive mouthpiece for the myth of native speaker superiority, her bewilderment over her native speaker interlocutors and their motives dilutes somewhat their rhetorical power.

There are other very subtle ways that Shadow undermines the power of the native speaker in her talk—she builds up to the idea that having an accent is not such a bad thing, and this also undermines the power of the native speaker, since accent is one of the key ways one can differentiate a native from a non-native. In the following excerpt, she reveals her opinions about native versus non-native speakers as teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL):



Interviewer: Were you surprised (.) to have a Chinese woman teach your class?

Shadow: Yes, I surprised.

I: Did you think she would be a good English speaker?

S: Yes. But also (.) mm (.) also it's easy to (.) mm (.) *I mean*, one, (.) although he, although she speak English well, very (.) very well, but I (.) *I think* (.) *you can* ((laughs)) *I mean* u:h we know that sh-she is a Chinese um *even if we*, (.) *we don't* (.) *watch hi—watch her*.

I: Is it better to have a Chinese teacher? if you're (.) who speaks English very well or is it better to have an American teacher?

S: Uh, it's (.) doesn't matter.

I: okay as long as they know English very well, it doesn't matter.

S: Uh, I mean um (.) the two instructor ((one native, one non-native)) in our (.) ESL class is very (.) very good. ((quietly)) they are very good. (Interview 2, April 2004).

Shadow's comments about non-native speaker teachers are interesting, especially in light of her attitudes about the non-native speaker carrying the bulk of the communicative burden in a conversation and her repeated framing of her foreign accent as a liability. While she does spend a great deal of conversational energy in this excerpt mitigating her statements, the upshot of her statements here are that yes, her Chinese ESL teacher was as competent as her American ESL teacher. Interestingly, Shadow's mitigating comments address the teacher's accent rather than her knowledge of English or her competence in the classroom—she hedges several times (“I mean...I think...you can...I mean”) before she explains that it is possible to determine that this teacher is Chinese “even if we, (.) we don't (.) watch hi—watch her.” Shadow's vaguely worded explanation (in other words, saying that she would know the woman was Chinese without even seeing her instead of saying something specifically about the fact that she has an accent) could mean that she simply doesn't have the vocabulary to describe her teacher's accent more plainly, but nonetheless, it reveals starkly her awareness that her teacher is marked *by the fact* that she has an accent. The fact that she mentions it at all suggests that she knows it is one possible way her teacher's linguistic abilities might be called into question, and in some ways, Shadow's unprompted mention of it allows her to head off doubts about her teacher's language proficiency by formulating a kind of pre-emptive strike against criticism.

In addition, Shadow's acknowledgement of her teacher's accent and her insistence on this teacher's professionalism and linguistic competence serves to dilute the power of sounding 'native'—if this teacher can maintain her credibility as a capable and knowledgeable ESL teacher despite her noticeable accent, then the idealized native speaker can potentially be replaced by a foreign-accented non-native speaker as a model for ESL students

A number of Shadow's other comments about accent suggest that as she interacts more with English speakers, she moves away from holding the native speaker as a model and viewing herself as a deficit speaker and more towards a focus on intelligibility and comprehensibility.

Interviewer: if you could sound like anyone when you speak English, like an actress or a famous person or a teacher or (.) anybody, who, who would you LIKE to sound like when you speak English?

Shadow: Mm . . . uh (.) like the natural *American people* or *uh* ((name of her Chinese ESL teacher)).

I: uh, okay! So you don't think it's bad to have a little bit of an accent.

S: I think uh her English is *very good*—is *good ENOUGH* ((laughs)) (Interview 2, April 2004).

As this excerpt demonstrates, as early as the second interview of this study, Shadow reveals that she does not feel she needs to get rid of her accent completely in order to function effectively in an English-speaking environment. She has already stated that her Chinese ESL teacher has a noticeable foreign accent, but she still mentions this woman as an example of whom she would like to sound like when she speaks English. Her final two statements at first seem at odds with each other—first she employs the intensifier “very” with “good” to emphasize her teacher's

proficiency with English, but then she goes on to augment this statement by saying the teacher's English is "good enough," and her use of the qualifier "enough" implies that perhaps the teacher's English is *not* "very good" but rather is simply adequate for her circumstances. Thus these two statements appear contradictory, but there is another interpretation of the juxtaposition of these phrases that is possible: Shadow's reference to her teacher's English being "good" is an appraisal of her *general* proficiency, of which accent is only one part, and she is explaining that, taken all to together, this woman's accent, fluency, vocabulary and understanding of grammar all create a "very good" composite of linguistic capability, which, while not native-sounding, is sufficient to serve communicative purposes. This interpretation may seem a bit farfetched, but taken together with Shadow's other statements about accent, it is increasingly clear that she believes on some level that having a foreign accent is both realistic and socially acceptable for a second-language speaker.

Shadow explains further her feelings about accent in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: if people can understand you WITH an accent, would you keep it?

Shadow: (4.0) mm (.) maybe

I: okay maybe a little bit of one? ((laughs))

S: little bit of accent (.) it doesn't matter

I: but if you could do anything, you would TOTALLY get rid of it?

S: Mm . . . ((sharp inbreath)) (4.0) maybe I (.) if I, if I feel people can understand me, maybe I (.) u::h, (.) I will, I will not try, to to get rid of the accent (Interview 2, April 2004).

What is interesting about this segment of talk is that it demonstrates Shadow's refusal to commit to the idea that having an accent is a liability. While she states in the previous excerpt that she would like to sound like a "natural American people" (which because of her use of the term "American," I have assumed her use of "natural" to mean "native"), she simply refuses in this excerpt to state that she would like to "get rid of" all traces of her foreign accent, even if she could. This rejection of the prospect of sounding "native" seems to contradict many of Shadow's earlier statements that outline her 'deficiencies' as a non-native speaker, especially in terms of her pronunciation. I think what it shows, however, is her increasing acceptance of the idea that, disadvantageous or not, having a foreign accent is part of her identity as a Chinese woman living in the United States, and to give up this accent, even if means sounding like a native speaker, may not be desirable even if it were possible. Having seen a Chinese-accented woman *teaching* English almost certainly contributes to her drawing this conclusion.

In the third interview, Shadow for the first time draws an explicit link between her accent and her identity:

Shadow: I think maybe um many for—I mean, *many Chinese students*? Have same, similar ideas as me.

Interviewer: mm hm . . . so they don't think accent is very, is a big problem; mostly they're concerned about grammar and vocabulary

S: yeah (.) somehow, maybe, (.) somehow, maybe:: u::h you can say *we are proud of our accent*? (Interview 3, November 2004).

This segment signifies a watershed moment for Shadow. For the first time, she mentions accent as something not to be burdened by or even just aware of, but as something that can be a source of pride. She does hedge her statement a bit by preceding it with “somehow, maybe” and by suggesting that she is one of a number of other people who feel this way, but still it seems that this is the first time during the course of the study that she has tied her accent to feelings of pride. It seems clear from her mention of other “Chinese students” who feel this way that part of the source of her newfound pride in her accent is tied to her sense of identity, because her accent specifically marks her as a Chinese speaker. This link to other students via shared accent may even build a sense of solidarity with her Chinese peers.

There are a number of reasons why this attitude of Shadow's only begins to emerge during the second and third interviews. The first is that her situation changes dramatically over the course of the study—she goes from being in a relatively sheltered, mostly Chinese-speaking environment to having to not only speak English daily but teach classes in English three times a week. In

addition, her experiences with native speakers have become more frequent but as a result, she has more interactions with native speakers that engender the kind of confusion discussed earlier in this chapter. Shadow's sense of uncertainty about what her native speaker interlocutors are thinking may contribute to her need to ally herself with other non-native speakers who may be in similar positions. Finally, while she interacts more and more in English over the course of the study, it is clear that her most fulfilling social relationships—with her husband, parents and colleagues—all are conducted through the medium of Chinese. Perhaps marking herself as Chinese via her accent is a way of demonstrating her cohesion with her Chinese peer, friends and family as much of her time is taken in conducting activities through English.

## **Conclusions**

Whatever the explanation, it seems apparent that even with an individual who seems as wed to the idea of native speaker superiority as Shadow appears to be, there are holes and cracks in this myth, or at least areas where the myth does not appear to penetrate individuals' experiences. While Shadow seems on the surface to fully embrace the native speaker as the ideal model for language learning, she does, over the course of the study, demonstrate a growing discomfort with the thought of fully replacing her foreign accent with a native-sounding one. In the third interview, she even presents her accent as a possible source of pride. For Shadow in particular, the presence of a highly effective, clearly Chinese-identified ESL teacher has had enormous symbolic impact and provides a conduit through which some of the native speaker's power can be drawn away. While Shadow had completed her class with the Chinese ESL teacher before this study began, that experience appears to resonate with her months afterwards. Despite the substantial amount of conversational energy Shadow invests in portraying non-native

speakers as deficit English users, Shadow states that her expectations for her Chinese ESL teacher were that she would, in fact, be a “good English speaker” (Interview 2, April 2004). She also mentions this teacher as one of the people she would like to sound like and in so doing, posits a non-native speaker on equal footing with native speakers, a process which might also be helpful for ESL students.



## CHAPTER V: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

### Emerging Themes and Conclusions

Though looking at each participant in this study individually is revealing and productive, it is also of great utility to examine the themes that emerge from looking at the participants as a collective: what factors are at play in all of their experiences? With what notions do they all grapple, and how does each individual approach these notions? Glaser & Strauss (1967) stress the importance of this process, of examining and re-examining data to find commonalities and explore the variety of experiences through which individuals encounter these concepts. It is important, they stress, not to come to an analysis with *a priori* categories but instead to see what impressions emerge both within individual data sets and holistically across multiple sets of data.

In this study, several themes emerged, and within each theme, the participants accrue several avenues of approach towards the concepts being explored. The overarching metaphor in this study is that of the myth of native speaker superiority, which has been a *de facto* assumption in societal interactions with non-native speakers. It is a *common sense* notion (Fairclough 1989) which has rarely been questioned, and even then only by academicians who have struggled to expose this myth in the everyday discourse it pervades. This myth permeates smaller sub-themes: those of intersubjectivity, identity and agency. A participant's desire (or lack of desire) for intersubjectivity with native-speaker peers is always haunted by this myth that puts non-native speakers at a disadvantage, dictating that they shoulder the responsibility to accommodate native speaker interlocutors in order to achieve intersubjectivity. Observing the process by which the

participants in this study come to terms with the confines and the freedoms of exploring intersubjectivity can offer a great deal of insight into the non-native speaker's experience. Similarly, participants' identities as teachers, students, and non-native speakers reside in the shadow of this myth which often positions them as inadequate. Even when non-native speakers' identities are evaluated positively, it is always to the degree that they conform to the standards dictated by this myth. Inspecting the way participants grapple with their identities and positionings is fertile soil for helping make hegemonic ideologies opaque and offering alternatives to the ideas which restrict non-native speakers' sense of themselves. Finally, each participant's sense of agency is always kept in check by the constraints of this myth, and their way of talking back to these constraints can provide insight on ways to empower non-native speakers. It is with these goals in mind that the following cross-case analysis is carried out.

### **Intersubjectivity**

Intersubjectivity as it is discussed here is drawn from Beyer's (2007) discussion of Husserlian phenomenological explorations in which he describes the way two subjects interact with each other. At the heart of Husserl's meditations on the way two subjects achieve intersubjectivity lie two concepts: a shared sense of empathy and an assumption of a shared understanding, similar to what Fairclough (1989) would later describe as shared "common sense" notions of norms and values. In order for two subjects to achieve intersubjectivity, according to Husserl, they must be able and willing to accept the other's ability to commit intentional acts *and* be able to put oneself "in the other one's shoes" (Beyer 2007, sect. 7). This, according to Verhagen (2005) is the essential attribute that separates humans from other animals: their ability to assume the perspective of another. In addition, they must assume that the other

shares their beliefs about what is right and wrong and appropriate and inappropriate in their given context. It is this sense of understanding and shared community that denotes the intersubjectivity these participants are attempting to achieve.

### Taking on, *like*, native features

Intersubjectivity is clearly a major concern for the participants in this study, but for reasons of language ability, they come to deal with this issue in very different ways. Yixuan, for instance, makes intersubjectivity with her native speaking undergraduate students and labmates a priority, because she wants to recapture her feelings of being a competent and well-liked teacher as she was in China. While in China, Yixuan relied heavily on having an informal, very friendly relationship with her students but slowly figures out that this strategy is ineffective in the American classroom. Thus her language and talk is centered around resurrecting that confidence and sense of competence and even excellence she has always associated with her teaching style.

Yixuan appears to believe that one of the best ways to achieve intersubjectivity is to use language the way the people with whom she wishes to interact use it, and her discourse takes on features most often associated with youth culture in the US. Specifically, Yixuan develops the ability to use the discourse marker *like* in a very “American” way. This section presents evidence for this assertion and ties Yixuan’s use of *like* to her desires for intersubjectivity with her undergraduate American colleagues and students.

Yixuan uses the token *like* with much the same frequency and in many of the same situations as a native speaker. In fact, she employs *like* over 40 times just in the data reported in her case study

as compared with the other two participants, both of whom use *like* less than a dozen times in the data presented here.

Fuller (2003) found that on the whole, non-native speakers use *like* less than half as often as native speakers in interview situations. In addition, out of the five discourse markers *oh*, *well*, *y'know*, *like* and *I mean*, native speakers used *like* the most while non-native speakers clearly preferred *y'know* to *like*. The difference between native and non-native speaker use of *like* is reported to be statistically significant. And while Yixuan's frequency of use of *like* is noteworthy, it is the way she uses *like* that is perhaps more vital to understanding her experiences.

Yixuan's use of *like* deserves scrutiny both because of the way she uses it and the discursive goals she attempts to accomplish by using it. Her use of *like* suggests a level of linguistic sophistication and understanding of vernacular forms that many non-native speakers are unable to demonstrate. In short, she uses *like* in much the same way and to serve the same purposes as native speakers do. For instance, she often uses it as a place holder or filler; in an interview, she says "it's kind of difficult *like* ah at once, um, once you you have the idear of those pronounce-ations, (Interview 1, February 2004)" and it is clear from the other filler she uses here that *like* is serving as a placeholder while she performs a lexical search. While in this example she also uses "um" to maintain her turn, in other instances, she more often uses *like*. In fact, *like* serves a number of functions and is employed in a number of different ways in Yixuan's discourse.

In the following excerpt, Yixuan is lamenting the lack of intersubjectivity between her students and herself and employs *like* twice in explaining her situation:

The teacher told us a lot about how to *like* um face those complaint...probably there is not a very good *like* communication between me and them (Interview 3, November 2004)

In this example, *like* actually splits the infinitive *to face*, and because it somewhat disrupts the grammar of the verb in order to introduce new information, it can be seen as a discourse marker of focus. Similarly, the second *like* is used in much the same way; it marks the word “communication,” which Chapter 2 demonstrates is a word Yixuan uses almost exclusively to mark verbal interactions between herself and native speakers—in this case, her students. It is clear from these examples that Yixuan has assimilated the ability to use *like* as a marker of focus, which Underhill (1988) claims is its primary function in informal discourse and serves to bring into focus the fact both that she must confront (or “face”) the complaints of her students as well as admit to the lack of intersubjectivity between herself and them. While she can empathize to some extent with them, it is clear she believes that they do not empathize with her and that they do not place the same value on teacher-student friendship as she does.

Another one of the most frequent uses of *like* for native speakers is to report speech, and Yixuan avails herself of this function as well, as evidenced in the following utterance:

I didn't have like comfortable feeling...cause I KNOW *like* some students, sometimes they couldn't understand me...they just, just *like* WHATEVER (Interview 3, November 2004)

Interestingly, not only does Yixuan use the reported speech function of *like* here (effectively using it to replace a word such as “say”) which Buchstaller (2001), Levey (2003) and Underhill (1988) describe as a major native-speaker use of *like*, but she uses it to quote a vernacular token “whatever,” with the same intonation and inflection as a native speaker undergraduate student.

As with the previous excerpt, it is ironic that this passage describes Yixuan's students' reaction to her English language proficiency and use when in fact the passage itself is a demonstration of the sophistication and extent to which she understands and uses English. She appears genuinely frustrated about her inability to communicate in a way her students deem effective, but it is clear from her use of the actual linguistic token *like* that she is, in fact, using English in a very native-like way—one that seems as if it would increase access to and possibly even intersubjectivity with her undergraduate students, since they share the same very unique style of communicating—that primarily used by members of youth culture in the US. Perhaps Yixuan hopes that the understanding of shared language will enable or promote the other shared understandings (ie, common beliefs about the ideal teacher-student relationship) and thus a sense of empathy between Yixuan and her students) that is necessary to achieve intersubjectivity.

It is perhaps disheartening to note that even when non-native speakers of a language acquire native-like vernacular discourse patterns as they strive to learn more about American culture,

they can still be partially or wholly rejected by their interlocutors because of their non-native accent (or, just as often, the interlocutor's *expectation* of a non-native accent), imprecise use of vocabulary or problems with listening comprehension.

Such native-like mastery of this linguistic convention fits well with Yixuan's apparent goals for using English, and that is to be able to glean cultural and pragmatic information from undergraduates, particularly her undergraduate labmates and with her students in the hopes of creating a friendly, almost peerlike, relationship with them as she did with her students in China, where she was considered a superior teacher. She wishes to learn to use the language as they do—to not only talk about appropriate topics, but to discuss them using natively like words and phrasing. Ironically, it is precisely because she has some grasp of nuanced linguistic markers that she is even able to convey her desire for intersubjectivity with native speaker undergraduates.

#### It's all about *you*: Personal Pronouns and Intersubjectivity

John approaches intersubjectivity in a very different way; his use of this second-person pronoun *you* suggests that he is also trying to establish a sense of closeness and shared understanding with his interlocutor, just as Yixuan is, since *you* conjures a sense of inclusion for the listener into the statements the speaker is making about him/herself and his/her experiences. In other words, using *you* can be one way a speaker can demonstrate his assumptions that he and his interlocutor share the same “common sense” notions.

While achieving intersubjectivity is important to both Yixuan and John, Yixuan attempts to gain entry into her interlocutor's world by using English as they do, whereas John uses *you* to almost co-opt his listener into a shared understanding.

Kuo (2002; 2003) explains in two different articles on Chinese public discourse that *ni* (Mandarin *you*) is often used to refer to an indefinite person while still establishing solidarity with interlocutors. This form of *you*, referred to by Kuo (2003) as “impersonal *ni*” (p. 29) is used very similarly in English, and it is one of the uses of *you* of which John avails himself.

In this next excerpt (previously examined, as a number of the excerpts in this cross-case analysis will be, in Chapter 3), John uses *you* in a variety of its manifestations, demonstrating the utility he finds the second person pronoun to offer:

J: Yeah, dilemma. Yeah, sometimes they got questions, so they raise their hands, but if *you* come there, they will (.) ((pantomimes dropping his hand))

I: put their hand down.

J: Put a hand down, so I mean, that's pretty (.) embarrassing.

I: Right



J: Yeah, so, sometimes *you* can remember those kind of students, so if they raise their hands, *you* can ((pantomimes looking away))

I: Ignore them?

J: Yeah, ignore them (Interview 5, December 2004).

John's first goal in this passage appears to be enhancing the sense of intersubjectivity in his conversation with his native speaker interviewer by involving her in the scenario. O'Connor (1994) describes this use of "interpersonal, involving *you*" as one that allows the speaker to distribute his agency to his interlocutor—in this case, the interviewer (p. 59). O'Connor reveals this use of *you* in recorded conversations with inmates in maximum-security facilities in the US as they tell stories about prison stabbings. She contends that using *you* in this way helps to draw in a listener who, like most people, does not "share stabbing as a common experience" (p. 59). John's use of *you* in this passage functions similarly; he employs the second-person pronoun to draw in his interviewer (to include her whether she has had teaching experiences or not) and enhances this sense of shared agency by his use of the modal *can*. Instead of saying, for instance, "you remember those students," he says "you *can* remember those students," (emphasis added) which suggests a sense of softening or choice between remembering or not and in this way seems to almost involve the interlocutor in the decision-making. Indeed, the use of modals in the "interpersonal" *you* (exemplified in O'Connor's data in passages such as "you could feel it through the skin...you couldn't do nothing about it," p. 58) introduces a sense of inclusion for the listener. By contrast, the *lack* of modals is what marks the *you* O'Connor describes as

“instructional *you*” (represented in her data in the utterances ““you throw the knife away...you jump under the showers,”” p. 52) which, by employing the simple present, takes on a much more imperative tone.

One might argue that the use of *you* is inherently intersubjective, as it addresses a second person directly and carries with it assumptions about that person’s cultural norms, often projecting the perspective of the speaker onto the interlocutor. However, one function of *you* John uses elsewhere in the data appears to be to perform what O’Connor calls “self-addressing,” meaning that he is addressing himself in the past and re-living events in an idealized way, rather than in the way they actually occurred. O’Connor (1994) explains this phenomenon in her prison data thus: “...giving an inmate the opportunity to position himself agentively in his own past can have an impact in the formation of a future self, perhaps a self more modeled on positive construction” (66). She appears to suggest here that storytellers can use *you* not only to involve their interlocutors, but also as a way to speak back to themselves, suggesting an inclusivity about *you* that has been largely ignored.

John employs this use of *you* in the following excerpt:

J: if the students do not understand *you*, they will not ask *you* questions anymore. Yeah.

You know, sometimes I think um if *you* can make a good impression I mean to the students, I remember some students always ask *me* questions, so because at the fi<sup>^</sup>rst time *I* solved the problems they had,

I: Okay

J: They had, and so maybe they had good impression for *you*, and they just keep asking *you*. (Interview 5, December 2004)

In this excerpt, John tries a new tactic with *you*. He switches back and forth between *I* and *you*, and because so much of what he is recounting takes place in the past, it seems clear that in this excerpt, more so even than in the previous one, John is employing the self-addressing function of *you*. In Mandarin, *you* [ni] is not typically used in this self-addressing way but rather is used most often to infuse a sense of informality into a conversation or to distance oneself from one's actions. John's use of *you* to achieve this self-addressing function is thus noteworthy; since it cannot be done in Chinese, his use of *you* here and in this way suggests his growing sophistication with English. This sophistication implies that he intentionally employed *you* in the earlier utterance for its intersubjective properties and not simply because he was speaking with another person and thus employed the second person pronoun by default.

#### Laughter: The Best Medicine for Achieving Intersubjectivity

Wrestling with discourse markers and personal pronouns is not the way Shadow approaches achieving intersubjectivity. She has perhaps the most complicated approach to intersubjectivity, which is to say that it is unclear whether achieving some sort of shared understanding with her interlocutor is a goal of hers at all or one she thinks is even possible. Shadow's main focus of communicating in English appears to be gaining more competence in vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, and it is possible that she does not believe, given what she sees as her state of proficiency (or lack thereof) that it would even be feasible to gain intersubjectivity with her native speaker interlocutors. While she constantly puts herself in her

interlocutor's shoes, she does not appear to be able to imagine these interactants seeing things from her perspective.

Shadow's heavy reliance on laughter, then, is an interesting puzzle. My central contention about her laughter is an extension of my argument about her laughter as presented in her case study, which is that Shadow's laughter does, as Vettin and Todt (2004) claim, help her mitigate her own statements, so that when she produces an utterance she is unsure about linguistically or wishes to hedge in terms of meaning, she has a non-verbal mechanism for doing so.

The non-verbal aspect of this strategy is perhaps the most important part of Shadow's linguistic approach to consider. Because Shadow does not believe her language skills are strong, she may subconsciously rely on nonverbal vocalizations such as laughter to convey what she is unable to communicate with words. Most of her worries with English center around this concern with not being understood; she mentions vocabulary and grammar and accent being major problems with which she must grapple when communicating with Americans and other native speakers.

In the next excerpt, Shadow demonstrates her belief in her lack of facility with the language and employs laughter in a somewhat curious way:

Mm (.) maybe the (.) maybe because I can't find the exact word and when I speak English ((laughs)) I I mm I can't pay attention to the grammar (.) yes. (Interview 2, April 2004)

Sometimes, I (.) I can let other people understand me but I can't use some exact words and I, I can't use exact sentence, uh . . . even some, some point words, but ((laughs)) other people is very clever and they can understand me u:h . . . yes (Interview 1, February 2004.)

In both of these excerpts, Shadow's laughter follows a negative self-evaluation specifically aimed at her grasp of precise and accurate ("exact") word choice. Because she mentions this often as a problem and laughs after its mention in both instances, it seems clear that she is using her laughter to camouflage a sense of shame or deficit she feels with respect to language. It appears that laughter, in mitigating her sense of personal deficiency, may allow her to seem more vulnerable and deserving of empathy to her interlocutors. By making the point that "other people" are bright enough to understand what she is saying, she exaggerates both the effort these other people must make as well as her own communicative failings. The closest she comes to attempting to achieve intersubjectivity, then, is to make herself appear more 'worthy' of sympathy. She still holds the native speaker in the highest esteem, and it almost seems that she is appealing to this sense of superiority she assumes they feel. She takes their perspective and makes assumptions about the way they see her and feel about her.

In this passage, as with so many others, Shadow uses laughter to soften the effects of what she says and to signal her embarrassment with her linguistic prowess—or lack thereof as she sees it. She believes Americans have trouble understanding her, and this is something that not only makes her feel some degree of shame but is also something she believes she needs to fix. Since

she cannot fix it, she has no choice but to mitigate the problem the only way she knows how—and so she laughs.

### Conclusions

It is clear, then, that all the participants in this study grapple with intersubjectivity—not just *how* to achieve it, but even—at least in Shadow’s case—*how much* of it one wants. Yixuan’s strategy of putting herself in her native speaker interlocutor’s shoes is to not only take on but gain somewhat of an innate sense of how to use the informal discourse marker *like*. It is as if by showing some effort in sounding like native speakers, she will find acceptance and reciprocity on their part. John appears at first to use the second-person pronoun *you* to achieve intersubjectivity because it is, after all, somewhat inherently intersubjective. He also uses it in more erudite ways to conjure a sense of inclusion for both himself and his listener, however—unlike Yixuan, he doesn’t want to become “one of them;” rather, he wants himself and his interlocutor to become “us.” Thus he uses *you* to instruct and even to speak back to himself but at the same time co-opt his listener into his self-reflections. John and Yixuan display linguistically sophisticated ways of trying to establish a sense of intersubjectivity with their interlocutors, but Shadow seems—literally—at a loss for words when it comes to trying to establish a rapport with native speakers. Because she is so heavily influenced by the ideology that native speakers are somehow inherently better than she is and have the control of all interactions, she feels muted both discursively and rhetorically. She downplays her confusion, self-percieved “mistakes,” and embarrassment by laughing, and it is unclear whether she thinks true intersubjectivity can be achieved at all when such a power differential is at play.

Whatever the case, it is clear that desire and confusion create a heady mix for these participants as they labor to gain an understanding of their native speaker peers and students. The sense of power endowed on native speakers to control the discourse makes the pursuit of intersubjectivity an even more arduous task for non-native speakers.

### **Social Identity**

Applied linguistics offers a number of definitions of identity. The view reflected here is one in which a number of conceptualizations coalesce: First, as outlined in the review of literature, Ochs (1993) offers this broad definition of social identity: “a cover term for a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life” (p.288). Norton (1995) notes that these roles and positions are constructed “within and across different sites at different points in time” (p. 13).

Davies and Harré (1990), however, explain that social identity is not simply a construction the individual creates independently from others, but rather that one is “positioned” by their own and others’ world views and the way the discourse is interpreted. They give the example of two people who are trying to assert their identities, one as a feminist and one as a caregiver. The feminist positions the caregiver as paternalistic as she interprets his statements and actions through the lens of ensuring that one is acting of one’s own volition and not in deference or “accessory” to someone else (p.56). The caregiver positions the feminist as being overly sensitive and paranoid. Neither interlocutor intended to be paranoid, paternalistic or overly sensitive, but their competing discourses reflected in their conversation positioned them as such.

Thus it is that a person cannot, independent of others, simply assert that their identity is to be constructed in a certain way. Power relations overshadow and in some cases rigidly govern the positions thrust upon participants in a dialogue. If one's discursive framework is devalued or marginalized, they may not be able to assert their positioning in the way that a speaker who either has the power or reflects the dominant discourse in their talk would be able to.

Social identity, then, is always a push-and-pull, affected by numerous factors: power relations, a sense of one's agency, an imagination of future roles, a commitment to the roles currently being played out, and the various competing discourses that seek to position one in certain ways.

#### But I'm, like, a Good Teacher: Using Discourse Markers to Demonstrate Competence

Yixuan, who is, as stated before, likely the most proficient speaker of the three participants in this study, is an interesting case in point for examining the way elements of grammar/syntax and word choice can demonstrate one's positioning—either by oneself or by others.

Yixuan has stated previously that she believed herself to be a good teacher when she began her career as an instructor back in China. Her students' evaluations of her were consistently good, and she enjoyed teaching in large part because she felt she had a special talent for it. When she arrived in the US and began teaching at the large university where she was taking graduate courses, however, her sense of being a "good teacher" was soon challenged.



The beginning of this chapter illustrates the way Yixuan employs very “nativelike” syntactic and colloquial forms to tackle her quest of achieving intersubjectivity with her students, and her negotiation of her identity as both a student of English and as a teacher emerges through specific linguistic constructions as well. To wit, Yixuan continues her unusual reliance on the discourse marker *like* to help her wrestle with the concept of her own social identity.

Yixuan relies on the “hedging function” of *like* to demonstrate the way she believes students are positioning her versus the way she has, up to now, felt about herself as a teacher. In the next passage, she reveals the competing opinions she and her students hold about her identity as a teacher:

Yeah it turned out that *like* I think probably after this section and the following week, I still feel some, some *like*...it seems like they are not satisfied with me (Interview 3, 11/04)

Both Underhill (1988) and Levey (2003) claim that *like* can have a hedging function as well. Underhill explains that *like* “can retain the effect of a hedge—that is, of seeming to leave the statement slightly open” (p. 241). In the above passage, Yixuan’s pairing of *like* with “I think” and “probably” and later with her restart (repeating “some”) and then using the construction “seems like” enhances the precariousness of the utterance—she evidently still feels there is something she must communicate about her students’ lack of satisfaction with her teaching and English abilities, but she cannot fully commit to her students’ apparent assessment of her because she still believes herself to be a skilled and compassionate teacher. In this way, *like*

helps her express her uncertainty in much the same way it does for the native speakers. In the next passage, *like* functions in a similar way: “I can’t understand and other student *like* kind of impatient” (Interview 3, November 2004).

In this excerpt, because it is paired with the modifier “kind of,” *like* appears to add a further element of ambiguity, either about the message that is being encoded or about the words she uses to encode it. This approximative quality of *like* is described by Levey (2003) as indicating “a discrepancy between the speaker’s actual utterance and what the speaker has in mind” (p. 27). Whether Yixuan is not sure the students are really impatient or isn’t sure whether impatient is the word she wants, the effect of *like* is the same, and it is a use of this token often employed by native speakers as well. Yixuan’s words belie the fact that she does not simply accept and internalize her students’ negative view of her as a teacher; instead of just confessing that yes, these students are, in fact, impatient with her listening comprehension skills, she hedges, as if she cannot or will not fully accept this behavior: they are not impatient; they are “like kind of” impatient.

Once again, it is Yixuan’s choice of such almost exclusively native-speaker construction that makes this piece of discourse even more interesting. Something has suggested to her that her native speaker students have a poor view of her ability to comprehend spoken English, but she cannot fully accept this and, ironically, chooses one of the most “nativelike” hedges to express her conflicted assessment of the situation.

Knowing *you* means Knowing me: Establishing an identity as a “good” English speaker

John, unlike Yixuan, does not seem to see his identity as a teacher as a site of great struggle—he seems much more focused on mastering the language and being seen as a “good” speaker of English. While he would surely not mind being seen as a capable and talented teacher, it is not an aspect of his identity in which he is particularly invested. In his interview conversations, John spends a great deal of time putting together the qualities he believes a proficient speaker of English would manifest. He employs various forms of the second-person singular *you* to achieve these discursive goals.

One form John uses from time to time is what Kitagawa & Lehrer (1990) refer to as “vague” *you*. They explain that this use of *you* is one in which the referent is not necessarily clearly defined but cannot be substituted by the word *one*. The authors differentiate vague *you* from the more common impersonal (Mandarin *ni*-like) *you* thus: “the impersonal use potentially includes everybody, including the addressee” but vague *you* “contradicts this implication by explicitly excluding the addressee” (p. 743). John demonstrates (consciously or not) an understanding of this use of *you* in the next excerpt.

John: For me, ah, I want to have the American accent because when I came back to China, accent is more like American, it’s easy for *you*

Interviewer: Back in China you mean or here?

J: China. Here, everybody can speak English. ((laughs))

I: So it gives *you* prestige?

J: Yeah, people look up to *you* in China (Interview 3, July 2004)

Here, John is obviously not including his native-speaker interviewer as the part of *you* that is a non-native speaking Chinese national who returns to China with a natively like accent (and, in so doing, gains prestige from his peers). He is talking about his Chinese peers, surely, but he is mostly talking about himself. He does not want a more American accent because he believes he will be easier for listeners to understand (though he certainly does believe this would be the case) but rather desires the prestige that comes with being the ideal non-native speaker he has created in his mind. Using the second-person pronoun to relay his beliefs about what it would mean to live his imagined identity may seem like simply a mistake on John's part, but the documented evidence that such use occurs in native speaker talk frequently enough to be referenced in an article on the second-person pronoun suggests rather that it is probable that John is demonstrating further his sophisticated understanding of *you* and thus his English-speaking proficiency, which is a major goal of much of his talk.

In the next passage, John makes a sophisticated syntactic move in that he employs not only the “vague” function of *you* but combines it with what O'Connor (1994) calls an “instructive *you*.” He deploys *you*, if-clauses, and imperatives to demonstrate his authority on what steps one should take to become a proficient speaker of English, specifically one with a more natively like accent:

First thing, *you* have to listen, right? Listen...how native people speaks. *You* know, if *you* want to do the right thing, *you* have to know the right way, right? If *you* mm if *you* know the right pronunciation of the, I mean if *you* know the right, um yeah, right pronunciation,

how, how native speak pronounce the word, *you* know, so then you can practice and *you* get, um, *you* got feeling how, why, why your mmm how do I say? Why, I mean, why *you*, why your accent was wrong and how to correct it. (Interview 4, November 2004)

Here, John's use of the present tense and the presence of the modal *have to*—which suggests an imperative command—combines with his use of if-clauses to make this paragraph sound instructional. The instructive quality of this passage in turn helps to establish John himself as a proficient speaker of English, since only a truly competent speaker would have the authority to instruct others in such a way. John reiterates his confidence in himself as a competent English speaker also by the vague use of *you* employed here: he is clearly not including the interviewer in his overarching use of *you* since he does not feel she needs tips on improving her English, but the broad audience suggested by his use of the second-person pronoun intimates that he is, however, confident in giving advice to a fairly wide audience of listeners. John's sophistication with such fine-grained linguistic details also affirms his capability as an English speaker, since he demonstrates a certain amount of prowess in navigating fairly complex and specific uses of the token *you*. In this passage, for instance, he seamlessly switches between using the discursive marker “you know” and the co-opting of the second-person pronoun “you” to explain what he believes he and his interlocutor “know.”

### Struggling with Identity: Clearly a Laughing Matter

As with her struggle over intersubjectivity, laughter serves Shadow well in demonstrating her ambivalence over the multiple and often contradictory social identities she enacts. One identity Shadow grapples with for the duration of her participation in the research are her

abilities as a speaker of English. In the very first interview, she discusses a negative experience she had with speaking English and describes it thus:

Yes, I have a frustrating experience. Somebody called me and said he want, he want to interview me, and uh, but I, and then he asked me some problem, but, but I can't understand him ((laughs)) and pardon? and pardon? And I can't understand him. ((still laughing)) I feel very disappointed. (Interview 1, February 2004)

In this excerpt, Shadow describes her feelings of inadequacy in not being able to communicate with her interlocutor. She even mimics her repetition of “pardon?” to demonstrate her attempt to cope with the feelings of awkwardness and frustration, but ultimately, she laughs. While it is true that Shadow is never very confident about her proficiency in English, her absolute failure to understand this man despite her requests for clarification leaves her feeling “disappointed.” Her laughter, however, serves to take some of the sting out of such an embarrassing confession.

Laughter, as has been pointed out, is often used to mitigate to “mitigate the meaning of the preceding utterance” (Vetlin and Todt 2004, p.93). Shadow's laughter, however, sometimes precedes embarrassing confessions and even weaves through long stretches of talk without regard to its position relative to the utterance being mitigated. However, it is also clear that since Shadow's laughter is not usually mirrored by the interviewer and so cannot be seen as, Stewart (1997) suggests, a listener's expression of sympathy or solidarity.

Shadow's use of laughter, however, helps to unify these somewhat inconsistent views of laughter. In a way, Shadow can be seen as using laughter to play the role of Stewart's (1997) empathetic interlocutor for herself: she is revealing shameful aspects of her identity and laughing throughout her discourse does not only mitigate her embarrassment but also provides herself with a listener who chuckles with camaraderie and understanding. In the following excerpt, for example, laughter seems to "stand in" for a compassionate interlocutor:

So I mean my accent is:: I mean half of, half of the Chinese students are better than me  
((laughs)) (Interview 4, December 2004)

On the surface, this comment may merely seem self-deprecating and would suggest Shadow's internalization of the concept that not only are second-language speakers generally inferior, but that even then, half of the Chinese speakers she knows are still better speakers than she. Note, of course, that she doesn't say that half of them are worse, though that is implicit in her statement, but focuses instead on the fact that others are more proficient. Her laughter, however, ameliorates somewhat the severity of this self-assessment; she says something harsh about herself and laughs, not just to mitigate her statement, but to provide herself with a sympathetic ear who in laughing both shares and eases Shadow's burden of her "non-native speaker equals poor speaker" identity.

Shadow's laughter also serves to belie her anxiety over certain issues, especially as she goes from being a cloistered graduate student to a teacher/expert in her field. In an early interview, she foreshadows the transformation she is about to undergo:

uh maybe (.) when I ((laughs)) when I graduated, I can speak English well and uh maybe (.) maybe in the NEXT semester uh, (.) I will (.) I will be a TA and will teach the undergraduate class mm so I have, I will feel some pressure to improve my English (Interview 2, April 2004)

Here, Shadow's laughter works in conjunction with her use of the future tense ("will be," "will teach," "will feel") to express her worry over her upcoming assumption of a teaching role. She is apprehensive: she chooses the word "pressure" to describe her external and internal compulsion to hone her English communication skills and repeats the word "maybe" three times, indicating her uncertainty and a refusal to commit to success. The presence of laughter intensifies Shadow's deep sense of concern, and it is unusual to see it deployed in such a way by a non-native speaker who has not explicitly been taught this function of laughter and who, if asked, would likely tell you that native English speakers only laugh when they find something to be humorous. However, Shadow does this again when she discusses the student-becomes-teacher transformation in a later interview as well:

Uh, so I mean so THIS year, uh I have MUCH responsibility? (.) Because the, if I'm just a student so ummm I, it doesn't matter if I come to class or be absent? ((laughs)) but NOW it's different, so (.) and uh (.) uh I was nervous, ((laughing)) I were nervous (Interview 3, November 2004)



Here, Shadow twice describes herself as being “nervous” and compares the days when she was “just” a student to her new role as a teacher with a heightened sense of accountability. Her laughter throughout exposes her anxiousness over this shift in identity and the pressures that result: she knows, especially, that others look to her to engender a sense of responsibility about her new role, since it now “matters” whether she comes to class or not. Her apprehension about this compulsion to accept her new role and her positioning by others and their ideals of what a teacher should be are given voice in laughter. This demonstrates, among other things, the extent to which laughter for Shadow is a site of discursive expertise; indeed, she employs it (perhaps not even consciously) with the same facility and sophistication that her two compatriots utilize *like* and *you*.

### Conclusions

To even grapple with identity on a discursive level takes some amount of sophistication and all three participants demonstrate their ability to do this, even as they may still get caught up in conflict between their ever-changing multiple identities. Each have found powerful discursive tools they can use to tweak and transform their various identities; Shadow uses laughter to feel less incompetent as a non-native speaker while John uses *you* to demonstrate his prowess as a competent non-native speaker. Yixuan’s expert use of native-like forms juxtaposed with her lexical choices referring to herself as a poor speaker/listener showcase her frustration in finding a linguistic identity that “fits.” Ultimately, though, these speakers find the search for social identities to be fraught with ambivalence as their efforts clash with dominant ideologies that attempt to label them with unifacted and static identity label of “non-native speaker.” University

students' expectations of what teachers should look, act and sound like often confounds the concept of non-native speaker teachers' identities even further.

### **Agency**

Agency as it is typically described is an individual's ability to assert her own power, will or influence, but more often than not in applied linguistics, it is constructed as a way for individuals to employ actions that help them resist certain positionings and capture a sense of control or power over hegemonic ideologies or unwanted circumstances. Agency, then, is almost exclusively used to describe the behaviors of those who have little or no access to what Bourdieu (1991) calls symbolic power, which is the "secret code" associated with the dominant group of individuals within a community (p. 51). In a society where the myth of native speaker superiority dominates, for instance, the group of individuals who may or may not assert "agency" are the non-native speakers or other linguistic outsiders.

Agency, of course, is always tempered with constraints. Canagarajah (2001) describes an ESOL course in Sri Lanka in which the students display oppositional behavior, which he claims is "unclear, ambivalent and passive" rather than engaging in ideologically focused actions which signify "resistance" (p. 224). In other words, Canagarajah explains that his students simply refuse to engage rather than find ways to subvert dominant ideologies. To this end, they doodle in their textbooks to make American/British characters resemble traditional Sri Lankan men and women, they resist non-grammar-oriented teaching techniques, and they stop attending class. Ultimately, however, they are constrained by the fact that they feel they must learn English and,

in order to do so, must demonstrate their proficiency on the teacher's terms. They may be said to be demonstrating agency, but within very narrow terms.

Accent is a particularly rich site for the study of agency. Because accent is so closely tied to one's identity, the manipulation of one's accent can demonstrate a fluidity of identity which can knock traditional power structures off-kilter. The anecdotal experience alluded to in the preface highlights this: A Spanish friend was discussing his accent and how pronounced his first language sounds were when he spoke English. He had been in the US for several years at that point and confessed, "I can sound a lot more American than I do." When asked why he didn't use a more American accent considering the prejudice many non-native speaker friends were often subjected to because of their accents, he said, "When I use that accent, I don't feel Spanish." His answer was noteworthy, and not just because he had so clearly traced the trajectory between accent and identity. Rather what seemed most striking was that while many non-native speaker friends and colleagues worked to decrease the degree to which their first-language sounds appeared in their spoken English and thus have more (perceived) access to discursive power, this man chose to retain those same sounds as a form of agency: maintaining his "Spanish-ness" was, for him, a way to speak back to the poor treatment bestowed upon non-native speakers with strong accents. If he didn't sound like an American, the argument might go, then he couldn't be complicit with the discrimination Americans visited on second-language speakers.

The children in Rampton (1996) used accent as a mode for accessing agency in a unique fashion. When teachers tried to question these children or the children needed some good or service from

an Anglo teacher, these children put on strong Indian accents when they responded to the teacher or made a request. Rampton theorizes that the children assumed these accents to in some way “conjure awkward social knowledge about inter-group stratification” and in this way throw off the power structure of the interaction (169). The teachers’ power was subordinated by the way the children used language to draw attention to latent racist attitudes about Southeast Asians living in England: that they are subservient, naïve, and “polite but incompetent in English” (p. 160). The child’s ability to take the discursive wheel, as it were, demonstrates a way he or she might enact agency in such a situation and, temporarily at least, rattle the traditional power relationship between a teacher and student.

Piller’s (2002) study demonstrates another avenue for agency of which non-native speakers might avail themselves. Her study examined non-native speakers who “passed” as native speakers, sometimes passively, by allowing others to assume they were first-language speakers and other times quite consciously, in order to take advantage of the relative privileges to which they believed native speakers had access. While the ways in which this demonstration of agency could be checked by, for instance, an interlocutor’s refusal to ratify the “passer” as a native speaker, it does suggest that accent is not simply a you-have-one-or-you-don’t binary distinction but rather a site of continually flowing contestation and even resistance.

The focus on accent as a site for exploring agency should not suggest that there are not a plethora of other factors that come into play as one engages in acts of agency. One’s teaching and interpersonal skills, experiences and knowledge can all serve as sites for agency. The focus of this study, however, is accent, and the intent of this exploration is to demonstrate ways that

accent itself can be an avenue towards agency rather than just another factor for which other acts of agency must compensate.

### Refusing to Act is Agency, too!

The way Yixuan chooses to exercise her agency is in many ways like her approach to learning and speaking English. While the myth of native speaker superiority permeates her experience just as it does for other ITAs, Yixuan chooses to exercise her sense of agency both by committing conscious acts as well as by deliberately refusing to act. Much of the discourse in the paragraph below has been analyzed in this study through a number of different lenses, but the following exploration allows for yet another layer of interpretation when Yixuan's words are examined as an act of resistance or display of agency.

In discussing her approach to teaching, Yixuan admits that her American ESL teachers have suggested she not form close, personal or friendship-like relationships with her students because often undergraduate students misinterpret this friendliness and assume it means they have an advantage over their peers who are not their teachers' "friends." Yixuan's American ESL teachers tell her this to sensitize her to her future students' expectations and ways that her good intentions may be misread. However, as the intersubjectivity section of this chapter explains, forging these close relationships are something Yixuan is not willing to give up on, because they were key to her success as a teacher in China. She explains her dilemma as she is caught between her teacher's advice to "separate yourself from the student" and her own desire to "have some close relationship between the students, sometimes I want to be one of the member of the student" (Interview 3, November 2004). She goes on to say that she has "tried very hard" and has

taken “a LOT of effort and time each week for preparing” (Interview 3, November 2004, emphasis in original), effectively disregarding her teacher’s advice about not trying to create a personal link between oneself and one’s students. Ignoring her instructor’s suggestions and acting on her own desires allows Yixuan to flex her sense of control and, within the constrained environment of the classroom, assert her power to refine her presentation skills to her satisfaction.

The next scenario is one in which Yixuan demonstrates once again her ability to take control of a situation in which her power may seem quite limited. In her classroom, for instance, she must present materials and assess students’ knowledge of the concepts being taught and the data being presented. In the passage below, she describes a shift in her approach to her teaching lectures:

Yixuan: actually I spend about *ten hours a week* just ah for preparing the lecture, instead of, I mean, *not including* to review their lab report or something, quiz. So, that’s the-the beginning part so it’s really tough for me this semester, but that (.) I DID it because one of my friends who was TA for other class? She told me she took ten hours for preparing THAT course and she, she’s NOW being the TA as what I did for THIS class and she said we need to take ten hours to do that and I did it, follow her suggestion and then *like* for, after half part of the section, uh semester finish, *she told me now she, she just ah did like about 3 hours for preparing the class, ‘cause she said our supervisor for this class? didn’t care much about what’s the students do or how they do, ‘cause actually what I did, the first step I need to be familiar with those materials on line and the, the lab book, yeah, and then, to, to ABSORB those ideas to be mine, this is kind of easiest ah part ‘cause I*

have some background in physiology it's not problem but I need some time to review all of the things

Interviewer: sure!

Y: then (.) I try to organize whi-which material I want to put in this class, and which material I DON'T want, so what I did was to *write down a lecture*

I: yeah

Y: *every word*. and then *try to memorize it* and during this process, I need to look up the pronunciation for [*every words*] that I not familiar with

I: [oh]

Y: even though, yeah, some words I KNOW the pronunciation but I try to pronounce it well, so I still look up the dictionary to find the correct pronunciation. And my, my friends actually, she said she (.) skip to see the materials online and what she did is *just* ah take a look, *just* the small part of the material in the lab book as the introduction of this lab and *just* ah focus on this part and (.) she said she doesn't care if the students know OTHER things because they should know that. Our responsibility is *just, just to supervise the LAB instead of give them knowledge*. [It's correct]

I: [you don't agree?]

Y: well, I, so *later* I try to spend *like* (laughing) *five to six hours a week* to prepare the material ((laughs)). But yeah, it was really *tough* at the beginning ‘cause I *actually can’t take SO much time* (Interview 3, November 2004)

The process of class preparation that Yixuan describes is a “lot of effort” indeed! She claims she spends ten hours per lecture (not per section) just preparing her lectures—and this time does not include any grading or meeting times with students. She “writes down a lecture,” presumably with a fairly elaborate script, checks the pronunciation of each word to ensure it is correct, and then commits these scripts to memory. Considering Yixuan is giving at least 3 lectures a week to at least 2 different sections of students, she is likely spending an amount of time equivalent to a full-time job just preparing for teaching—and this is in addition to her responsibilities as a student, lab tech, mother and wife.

But it is not the hours of preparation which take a toll on Yixuan. Rather, it is the lack of positive results she gains from her extra efforts. She explains that her students still seem dissatisfied with her, and that “it’s not good effect what I expected” (Interview 3, November 2004). She appears demoralized by the paltry return she has gotten from her investment of effort, but instead of redoubling her efforts, she significantly reduces her workload. This act denotes a backing away from the myth of native speaker superiority, which would suggest that if a non-native speaker’s efforts to be comprehensible have not yielded good results, then the non-native speaker is at fault and must persevere and work even harder to find a way to make her/his speech comprehensible



to native speakers. Yixuan does the opposite—she goes from spending 30-40 hours to spending 5-6 hours a week preparing for teaching.

In China, Yixuan invested a great deal of time preparing for her classes, and she was rewarded by praise from her students. While her preparations here are primarily driven by her view that her English-speaking abilities are what her students find problematic, she still follows her old “recipe for success” until it no longer yields the results she desires.

There seem to be two factors that motivate Yixuan to reduce her preparation time. One is that a friend and colleague reminds her that she is there to teach students what they need to know to complete the work for the lab course; she is not there to “give them knowledge.” The friend notes that their supervisor does not care how the students do or what they do with the instruction they receive, only that they receive it. Yixuan uses the word “just” five times in explaining her supervisor’s expectations for information passed on to students (i.e., “just, just supervise the LAB”). Yixuan seems to realize she is wasting her time in trying to “absorb those ideas to be mine” and passing that knowledge to her students. They do not seem to want knowledge, only preparation for the questions and experiments before them, and Yixuan’s colleagues reinforce these expectations with their rather clinical approach to teaching. Yixuan is disappointed in many ways, since making background knowledge available and understandable was received so positively by her students in China that she has come to see it as a hallmark of a good teacher and an essential part of her own teacher persona. Being told that such efforts are not necessary—and seeing from her own students that they are not even welcome—encourages her to cease her efforts in first absorbing the knowledge for herself and then passing it along to students.

The other factor that persuades Yixuan to limit her preparation time is that her efforts to use natively-like pronunciation of laboratory terms and related vocabulary are both misunderstood and seem to be completely unappreciated by her students. She notes their dissatisfaction with her, their impatience and their lack of sensitivity or sympathy for her in considering how difficult maintaining native-like pronunciation is for a non-native speaker. Their general obliviousness to the sheer number of hours she has spent preparing to instruct them further justifies her refusal to continue to expend such effort. If they don't care—or even notice—why should she? She does not have, as she points out, the time to spare and could better invest it in her own studies. She no longer has to continue catering to the idea that the responsibility for enabling discursive engagement is the non-native speaker's. Without her student's commitment to participate in conversation, her efforts are fruitless despite the amount of time and energy she invests in them. Her experience shows her the obvious flaws of the myth of non-native speaker inferiority and allows her to reject its positioning of her.

One other intriguing aspect of this excerpt is the fact that Yixuan only uses the discourse token *like* three times, which is unexpected in such a long passage, as her talk is typically peppered with *like*. One explanation could be that this is simply coincidence, but it seems more likely that here, where she is explaining her own assumption of agency in refusing to continue to spend time endearing herself to her students, she subconsciously draws away from a linguistic marker that discursively represents her desire to get close to native speakers. Without realizing it, she may be inclined to use *like* more in describing her students, her desire to achieve intersubjectivity with them, and their reactions to her and use it less in explaining her own actions. In this

passage, she is not talking about her students so much as she is describing her own actions, first in expending a great deal of energy to get this closeness she wants (despite warnings from her native-speaker teacher that she not do so) and second in consciously reversing this decision in the face of poor results. The times she uses *like*, for instance, she employs it to denote ambiguity in terms of the reduced time she and her colleague decide to spend preparing for classes. Thus she still uses *like* in a native-like way—she just uses it much less often.

### The Act of Ignoring: Asserting One's Agency by Denying Another's

John's assertion of his own agency is fascinating: In the next passage (examined twice previously), he flexes his facility with the second-person pronoun *you* to suggest strategies for dealing with students who reject his help by ignoring him when he responds to their requests for assistance or information:

J: Yeah, dilemma. Yeah, sometimes they got questions, so they raise their hands, but if *you* come there, they will (.) ((pantomimes dropping his hand))

I: put their hand down.

J: Put a hand down, so I mean, that's pretty (.) embarrassing.

I: Right

J: Yeah, so, sometimes *you* can remember those kind of students, so if they raise their hands, *you* can ((pantomimes looking away))

I: Ignore them?

J: Yeah, ignore them (Interview 5, December 2004).

This passage has been examined before, in John's case study, but it bears yet another look, because John's suggestion here, that a teaching assistant can simply ignore questions or requests for help from students who have shamed him in the past by rejecting his authority or knowledge about the subject at hand (physics), is quite subversive. Instead of working to prove his competence in English or even in the subject matter (though it seems that what the students are rejecting is his foreignness or perceived lack of proficiency in speaking and comprehending English), John turns the tables on them by disregarding their queries for help. He upends the traditional power structure by which native speakers ratify a non-native speaker's right to speak by refusing to address them entirely. By denying these students another chance to snub him, he asserts his agency and cuts off access to his expertise. This act may seem almost petty, but in it, John takes control of his destiny, to a certain extent, by affirming that he will not be dictated to by students who have denied him legitimacy in the past.

Another aspect of this passage worth examining is the degree to which John enlists his interlocutor in his somewhat seditious act. Once again, John avails himself of the aspects of *you* that allow him to include his interlocutor as sort of an overarching *we*. As the research by O'Connor (1994) previously mentioned in this chapter suggests, impersonal *you* provides a way for a conversation partner to be drawn into an experience he or she may not necessarily have

ever encountered personally. John's use of *you* marks an attempt to make an encounter that is unfamiliar to the listener become an experience that is suddenly shared between the two of them. By instructing the interviewer on ways to turn uncomfortable classroom situations to her advantage, John enlists her in legitimizing his flouting of the traditional international teaching assistant/native speaker student power dynamic.

John's defense of himself as a proficient speaker of English surfaces in other ways as well. Recall the misunderstanding with his Indian lab-mate in which the lab-mate at first does not comprehend John's rendering of the word "pens," which he produces more as [*pæns*]. John himself is the one to initially offer the explanation that it is his accent which has caused the misunderstanding, but he swiftly rejects this, offering the explanation that a reference to "pens" in a lab setting would be so marked and unexpected that whomever he was speaking to would need to clarify his statement before responding. This explanation is entirely plausible, but it is one that is strongly discouraged by the dominant discourses of native speaker superiority, or, to be more specific, non-native speaker inferiority. John refuses to allow the dominant discourse to veto his "right" to be misunderstood in the same way a native speaker might be misunderstood as opposed to simply internalizing a *de facto* assumption that his foreign accent must be to blame.

### Can Echoing the Dominant Ideology be a Form of Agency?

Examining Shadow's data puts an interesting spin on the investigation of agency. Because a great deal of her talk is invested in the myth of native speaker superiority, it is not surprising that she chooses to focus her efforts on improving her English to more nativelike

“standards” as opposed to circumventing or resisting native speaker dominance, as John does. The follow passage outlines her beliefs on how one’s energies should be invested:

Mm. (4.0) It’s hard to say ((laughs)) But I mm . . . I think because we are international students, we, we study here, we should improve our English. It’s . . . it’s OUR responsibility. We don’t uh (.) we don’t depend on other peoples (.) I mean, um (.) other peop—other student don’t have, (.) don’t need to (.) don’t have responsibility to: (.) to be patient with us. (Interview 2, April 2004).

Shadow uses the first person plural forms to refer to herself and her compatriots eight times, which at first might suggests a sense of solidarity or group membership, but which also—when seen juxtaposed with Shadow’s laugh after “it’s hard to say,” may also be seen as a way to draw focus away from herself as an individual. Two aspects of this piece of discourse suggest this conclusion: one, the question this passage is responding to is “Do you think the other people should try to understand *you*? Do you think they have a responsibility to be patient?” (Interview 2, emphasis added). In addition, up to this point, Shadow has been answering most questions with far more I-statements than with references to herself as part of a first-person collective. It is far too simplistic to say “she uses ‘we’ to distribute her responsibility to be comprehensible,” but her switch to the first person plural certainly is telling. Whether she makes this move to undergird the sense of solidarity she feels with Chinese peers or because she believes her statements will have more weight if they come from a collective, the effect is the same: instead of being a lone voice, she takes on the strength of a chorus.

One wonders, however, why Shadow feels compelled to make these particular statements in the first-person plural when they are statements that the dominant ideology of native speaker superiority fully supports anyway. The concept that native speakers bear any responsibility in helping non-native speakers to be “more comprehensible” runs counter to the myth itself—it is the non-native speaker’s responsibility to accommodate the native speaker’s expectations as much as possible, since only the native speaker can set expectations and standards in the first place. Thus Shadow is choosing to exert her “agency” with a statement that is largely uncontested in the dominant discourse. This suggests a larger question: if one asserts one’s will or expends a certain amount of effort towards an act, can it still be considered to be an act of “agency” if it is in alignment with the dominant discourse? Is Shadow utilizing a sense of agency or is she merely parroting the overlying ideology about non-native speakers? Is agency still agency if it is not subverting the prevailing paradigm?

A final curiosity about this passage is, as always, Shadow’s laughter. She laughs after the phrase “it’s hard to say.” Since she has so often used laughter to downplay previous statements, it is interesting that she says this after a colloquial phrase demonstrating such ambivalence and reluctance. Does her laughter serve to enhance the ambivalence of her statement, or does it serve to subtly undermine it? Is it really “hard to say” that non-native speakers are responsible for the bulk of conversational responsibility when talking with native speakers? It seems, if anything, quite easy to say something that jives with the dominant theory of the undisputed inferiority of non-native speakers. It is not a great jump in logic to assume then that Shadow is suggesting, probably subconsciously, that what she is saying is not at all “hard to say” but is a fairly blunt summation of the dominant myth of native speaker superiority.

Shadow demonstrates agency in another novel way. In the next passage, she and the interviewer discuss strategies for encouraging students to provide answers to questions Shadow asks in class. The interviewer describes another ITA's use of a technique she was taught in a teaching preparation class, and Shadow's reaction belies her resistance to using this method:

Shadow: sometimes I ask them some questions uh I can check, and SOMETimes NO students answer, but ah so

Interviewer: what happens when you're in a class and no one answers, what do you do?

S: I will answer it myself.

I: Because different people do different things. One of the TAs that I know, a Chinese woman, um, reads the list of names and she'll ask if, if no one answers=

S: =oh! =

I: =she'll say 'Angie!' and Angie says 'Uh.'

S: Oh, I so I don't act uh that since, I, uh, Americans, eh I will get them nervous oh

((laughs)) (Interview 3, April 2004)



The ITAs in this study, not unlike ITAs at universities all over North America, have all learned western teaching approaches with which they have vary degrees of comfort. For instance, Yixuan’s distaste for the detached, aloof manner she has been instructed to use with undergraduate students has been documented here. The method the interviewer is suggesting in this case is also a popular strategy employed by native speaker teachers in the US: when no one offers an answer to a question a teacher has asked, these teachers select a student at random (or, in some cases, the one they think is paying the least attention) and call on him/her without warning.

In this excerpt, Shadow, who very rarely resists the instruction she has been given in regards to undergraduate students, discreetly but firmly refuses to employ this technique. First, she expresses her surprise by nearly cutting off the interviewer as she exclaims “oh!” and then immediately follows this exclamation with “I don’t act that.” Her use of the word “act” appears significant; most Americans would say “I don’t do that” rather than “I don’t act that [way]” or “I don’t act [like] that.” One can be reasonably sure that Shadow is familiar with the do-construction which appears much more often in discourse than either of the *act* idioms. Her use of this word suggests that for her to do something like calling on a student who had not volunteered an answer would, in fact, be an *act*. She is not comfortable “acting” what she believes to be the part of an American teacher, and so she refuses to do so. Once again, she punctuates her statement with a laugh—one that is reminiscent of the laughter that pervades her discussion of the inferiority of her English proficiency when compared to her husband’s.

Despite the fact that Shadow seems most of the time to firmly believe in the myth of native speaker superiority, she does have one moment in which she demonstrates agency, even though it is through passive resistance. It is the moment referred to in her case study as a “watershed moment,” as it is the only time she ever explicitly contradicts one of the fundamentals of the myth of non-native speaker subjugation: she states not just that accents are okay as long as the speaker is understandable to native speakers but goes so far as to claim that accents can inspire a sense of pride. She says:

I think maybe um many for—I mean, many Chinese students? Have same, similar ideas as me. . . so they don’t think accent is very, is a big problem. . . yeah somehow, maybe, somehow, maybe uh you can say we are proud of our accent? (Interview 3, November 2004)

It is not clear how this idea germinated for Shadow, but it does show her using her agency to resist the prevailing ideology that dictates that accents are something of which one should be ashamed. Shadow does not often employ her agency to actively resist the constant onslaught of messages the culture around her generates about non-native speakers and their pronunciation of English. Shadow may not be outspoken or forthright in discussing a sense of pride where her accent is concerned, but she does find ways to chip away—however passively—at the notion that this accent should be a source of shame.

## Conclusions

While the three participants in this study all use very different approaches to resist the impotence and helplessness imposed on them by the idea that native speakers control the discourse and the actions non-native speakers are required to take in response. Non-native speakers, the myth dictates, should expend their efforts in making themselves more comprehensible to native speaker. Any attempt to reject this positioning is an act of agency, and the individuals discussed here employ a number of different strategies to avail themselves of their ability to indicate their departure from this way of thinking. John takes bold actions, such as intentionally ignoring his students' requests for help. Shadow at first invests her energies in serving as a mouthpiece for this myth but soon finds the courage to refuse to engage in native-like ways of teaching her class. Finally, she asserts her pride in her accent, signaling her denunciation of the suggestion that accents can and should only be a source of shame. Yixuan's rejection of this myth is somewhat passive but no less firm; first she too resists employing native-like approaches to teaching, but she eventually sees the inanity of the allegation that it is a non-native speaker's job to accommodate native speaker expectations and, in so doing, she simply ceases her efforts to support it by spending endless hours preparing for lectures for her students.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

### Introduction: Major Findings

Typically, concluding chapters begin with a look back at one's research questions. While the research questions put forward in this study are meaningful and worthy of being examined, they do not encapsulate the most important findings of this research. This section will, then, take a look back at the research questions and how they have been answered and will look beyond the answers to these questions toward the way the findings of this work add to the conversation about, specifically, the disruption of ideologies like the myth of native speaker superiority and the ways that deeply detailed analysis can add to and enhance the existing research on second-language speakers.

### Research Questions

Two questions were put forward to guide this research as it began. They were:

- 3) What effect does the myth of native speaker superiority seem to have on the way international graduate students construct their identities?
- 4) What different strategies and tools do international graduate students employ in addressing the presence of this myth in their daily lives?

It is tempting to answer the first question with a simple, one-word reply: Vast. However, the answer is of course quite complicated. The positioning of non-native speakers as inherently deficient is an apparition that haunts the participants in this study. The second question is one

that the whole study attempts to document, and thus the two questions are so intertwined that they must be addressed somewhat simultaneously

For Shadow, the sense of non-native speaker deficiency follows her throughout the study, and it is only at the very end of the data collection that she is seen subverting this myth by expressing pride in her own accent and in accepting a fellow Chinese national as a legitimate model for her own language development. She uses mostly self-effacing laughter to negotiate her feelings about native speakers' confounding emotional responses to her (she believes they are nice to her, but seems to believe that the friendliness is not genuine but more of a cultural expectation), her husband's more native-like use of the language, and her entrée into the arena of teaching.

John, on the other hand, vacillates back and forth between challenging the idea of non-native speaker inferiority and becoming complicit with it. He does not believe his accent approximates native-speaker patterns enough and often labels it as a "problem," but he also creates strategies to resist being categorized as a "poor" speaker of English. He cites his advisor's approval of his way of speaking and his inventiveness in using syndicated American television programs as an instructional vehicle as evidence that he is a competent speaker of English, and he constantly seeks out situations in which he is forced to speak English, as in making phone calls to equipment providers or vendors and even in enrolling in the study itself. He also creates ways to push back against his native speaker undergraduate students' attempts to assert a sense of power over him by ignoring those who shame him in the classroom.

Yixuan's journey through the study is more circular. She begins the study as a confident non-native speaker, aware of her accent but also fully convinced that she is comprehensible and that this is what matters to her interlocutors. Her concerns about language are more social and cultural: she wants to know what topics she can offer up for discussion and ways to avoid bringing up subjects that may make her native speaker interlocutors uncomfortable. When she begins teaching, however, this sense of competence is threatened by the uniformly disparaging and disappointing reactions she gets from her students. She begins to paint herself as a deficient speaker after attempts at communicating with her students go awry. Her initial image of herself as a competent teacher, a social identity she had cherished in China, devolves as she is denied the kind of intersubjectivity with her students that she desires. Her authority as a teacher is eroded by the lack of cultural capital she holds as a non-native speaker. It is her desire for more informal communication and more emotional positive affect in the classroom that begins to bring her back towards her former view of herself; once she and her students get to know each other and they see her desire to help them, their communication problems, while not totally eradicated are, at least, ameliorated. It is ironic that this less formal style of communication in the classroom is one of the factors that helps Yixuan regain her confidence, as it is one she was warned away from by her ESL teachers.

The research questions, then, have pointed this study in the right direction, but the larger implications of the study as a whole go beyond their purview. Simply put, the central finding of this study is that despite a predominant ideology that constantly reifies the positioning of the native speaker as the standard-setting "perfect" speaker of a language, even those who labor under this myth (ie, those defined as *not* native speakers) find ways to question, destabilize, and

subvert it. What is perhaps most interesting about this phenomenon is that even speakers who often serve as a mouthpiece for the vast linguistic investment in the concept of nativity will still subconsciously undermine it in their discourse. Recall Shadow's early explanations of why native speakers could not understand her speech—all of the misunderstandings were, as she told it, due to her failure to replicate the pronunciation, grammatical or lexical patterns of native speakers. However, when the question is put to her of whether a native or non-native speaker would be a better teacher, she states that it doesn't matter and goes on to add that both the native and non-native instructors she has had have been "very good" (Interview 2, April 2004).

#### Grappling with ideology: Fits and starts

Uncovering these seemingly contradictory ways of thinking reveals two powerful understandings. The first is that beliefs about language (such as that of native speaker superiority) are deeply entrenched in the way the second-language experience is conceptualized both by individual speakers and by society as a whole. For an individual, then, challenging an ideology with so much cultural power behind it is rarely an abrupt about-face as the result of a sudden epiphany but is better characterized as a one-step-forward, two-steps-back course of action. In searching for a metaphor for this process, I recall that a friend of mine once said that the first time she went out and left her infant son with a babysitter, she felt as if she had left an arm or a leg behind—she was so accustomed to having him with her that she felt like a part of her physical body was missing when he was not. When ideologies that privilege the native speaker have so deeply permeated an individual's experiences, letting them go can be like losing a part of herself. At least, the argument might go, when one is labeled a "deficient non-native speaker," one knows what to expect, how to act, and who one is.

For those who have seen the proverbial man behind the curtain (and who, oddly enough, tend to be among the traditionally privileged native speaker group), the reluctance of non-native speakers to abandon their view that their way of speaking is “deficient” can be frustrating. Certainly I grappled with moments of acute frustration when I would hear the participants in this study insist on shouldering the entire conversational burden and compare themselves unfavorably with native speakers. But telling them they were wrong or that they had been co-opted into perpetuating a unsubstantiated ideological claim would have done no good: it was only through living their lives, participating in conversation after conversation, becoming members of a variety of discourse communities and being able to think reflectively on the ideas they were ventriloquating that they were able to begin to dance, however clumsily at first, with the notion that they were legitimate speakers of English.

#### The “critical” thing about discourse analysis

The second notion that emerges from the examination of seemingly contradictory meanings is that the examination itself is only possible when fine-grained analysis of data is performed. It is only through painstaking attention to Shadow’s discourse, for example, that the theme of laughter is exposed, and only a detailed analysis of the context in which her laughter occurs demonstrates the way it indexes her discomfort with her husband’s assumption of a ‘teacherly’ role. If her words are taken at face value, Shadow’s opinion seems to be that Xian Sheng is the better English speaker, and as such, she defers to him in all things related to speaking English. Knowing that her laughter signals discomfort, however, shows that while she does defer to him to be an ad hoc translator and carry most of the communicative burden in



English by representing them as a couple, she is *not* okay with his attempts to take on an instructive role. It may seem like splitting hairs to point out that Shadow is, in essence, accepting of her husband's being the "better" English speaker as long as he doesn't try to make himself her teacher—isn't it enough, one might ask, to simply know that she thinks he speaks English more proficiently than she? Isn't what is sought here evidence of the ideology that suggests that because her husband speaks English more like a native speaker does, that he speaks "better?" Isn't this that we are looking for?

The answer is yes and no. Yes, certainly it is important that we see Shadow's insistence that her husband's English is better than hers to be a perpetuation of the myth of native speaker superiority (since she believes his talk more closely approximates that of native speakers). If this is all we see, however, we miss the full weight of the power differential that disparities in English proficiency cause between Shadow and her husband. Her laughter helps us see that she is willing to recognize that giving her husband the communicative responsibility of representing them as a couple means vesting him with more power since he is literally able to control the discourse. But accepting his attempt to teach her would take his authority to a higher-than-acceptable level: she sees him as her equal and her partner, and for him to suddenly start correcting her or making evaluative statements about her language proficiency simply gives him too much power. We see, then, that not only does she think his English is "better" because he sounds more nativelike, but that *because* he speaks English "better," he gains a certain amount of discursive clout. If this power became mixed with the inherent authority of the teacher role, the compounding effect would be too much for her to continue to see him as her equal.

Thus, the two main conclusions this study draws are that critical discourse analytic approaches are crucially important in analyzing data and that challenges to one's identity, especially as it is situated by the myth of the deficient non-native speaker, are extremely gradual, constantly swirling and often circular. I believe these two notions can enhance both knowledge creation and pedagogy and will demonstrate in the next section how this can be done.

### **Contributions to Scholarly Research: Can Methods be Theory?**

Building theories around methods of data analysis is rare in the field of Applied Linguistics. One defends the method one chooses, and then moves on to the “real” knowledge that analysis helps to uncover. A central finding of this study is, as mentioned, the very real ways that a critical analysis of data serves to reify or subvert the surface-level meanings to which an individual gives voice. For instance, Yixuan's claim to want to be more of a peer or “friend” to her undergraduate students is borne out in her discourse: her frequent use of the discourse marker *like* is nearly identical to the way a young college student would use it. Without realizing what she is doing, Yixuan is discursively reaffirming what her words have said: she wants to be able to communicate in ways that resonate with her undergraduate students so that they can develop the intersubjectivity she believes is vital to instantiating her identity as a good teacher.

It appears, then, that critical discourse analysis does not need much defending as one of any number of instruments in the methodological toolbox, and therefore what is being argued here is perhaps a stronger statement: that such an analysis is necessary to *any* examination of discourse, and that, most importantly, it is an incredibly powerful vehicle for second-language speakers to begin to see how meaning is made. In other words, any analytical method must take into account

the fact that ideologies are always swirling beneath the surface of talk and that looking at these data in a very granular way is often the only way to reveal these ideologies. Becoming sensitized to these ways of approaching discourse is invaluable to second-language learners in particular because it can provide insight not only into fine-grained aspects of the language but also into the fact that all discourses have inescapably ideological themes. The implications of teaching non-native speakers to critically analyze the talk of their native-speaker peers will be discussed further in the section on pedagogy and praxis, but it is important to note before addressing critiques of CDA.

As with any method—and especially one so explicitly political as CDA—has its critics. Jones (2007) takes on critical methods of analyzing discourse by arguing that there is, in fact, *no such thing* as critical discourse analysis. He argues that because “ordinary, everyday communication already involves the critique of communication,” that breaking discourse down by “a system of forms, meanings and rules” is essentially meaningless (p. 338). He gives an example of communications between himself and his neighbors about a fence he is building and how his “critique of communication” allows him to choose whether to try and charm, browbeat or subvert his neighbors in getting his fence built. He also seems to dismiss the power of connotation in claiming that “people can be racist, words cannot,” which sounds a bit like the linguistic equivalent of the National Rifle Association’s popular slogan that “guns don’t kill people; people do” (p. 342). Just because words are arbitrary does not mean they do not do harm, and it is the historical processes through which words are used to encode hegemonic ideologies that is under scrutiny. CDA does not study “racist” *words*; it studies the way people purporting racist ideologies *use* these words to enact various forms of power and domination.

What Jones (2007) does not take into consideration, then, is the impact of context and the degree to which it informs the interpretation of linguistic data. For instance, one must consider context when hearing the statement “give her a hand.” If the context is *American Idol*, for instance, the phrase likely calls for a round of applause, whereas if the individual in question is attempting to lift a piece of furniture, this interpretation would not necessarily imply. The “forms, meanings and rules” he dismisses as static linguistic entities in fact merely represent patterns that recur in discourse—for example, speakers of English tend to use the modal verb “should” when indicating external dictates of expectations or obligations and use the modal “must” when wishing to imply that the performance of whatever act being described is required. But all linguistic patterns take on different meanings in different contexts, and the truly critical discourse analyst takes these into account. Laughter, for instance, most often indexes humor, but in Shadow’s case, the context in which she employs it suggests the less-common use of laughter to mitigate an utterance or face-threatening act.

Furthermore, Jones’s suggestion that everyone approaches every communicative encounter in an inherently critical way may be true, but for second-language speakers, the ability to engage in discursive critiques in their second language may be limited by their knowledge of discourse patterns. John, for instance, uses “pretty good” and “very good” interchangeably and so may not be able to employ modes of critical response if he remarks to a lab mate that a groundbreaking experiment is “pretty good” and she responds with “*PRETTY* good? It’s great!” His sense of confusion with this unexpected retort may completely derail any critical expression on his part.

To be fair, Jones (2007) is addressing mainstream CDA, which has typically looked at more formal and public discourse that is explicitly ideological, such as political speeches and texts without the additional ethnographic and longitudinal data-gathering done here. The use of a critical discourse analytic technique with spoken data, especially that of non-native speakers, is unusual and, frankly, not without its challenges—a topic which will be addressed in the section that lays out the limitations of the present study. Still, Jones’s argument is uninformed in the very least and denies the very real good CDA has done and, I believe, can do—especially for second-language speakers.

Luke (2002) puts forward a critique of CDA that must be addressed as well. Luke argues that instead of just leaving us to our own “critiques of communication” (Jones 2007, p.338), it is actually necessary for critical discourse analytic methods to “identify and document, in neoMarxist terms, preferred modes of emancipatory discourse” (p.105) He explains that CDA should be able to articulate what should be and not just what is. To be sure, he sets forth a noble goal, but it is one that runs the risk of sounding a bit paternalistic, in that it suggests, however well-intentioned, that disenfranchised individuals and those concerned about providing them with avenues of resistance need to have idealized goals spelled out for them. I believe that the truly emancipatory task, however, is to provide those who are marginalized by dominant ideologies with tools (like CDA) and/or with descriptive analyses of discourse so that they can create a pathway of resistance from their lived experience. Johnson (2006) explains that the knowledge that

informs activity is not just abstracted from theory, codified in textbooks and constructed through principled ways of examining phenomena, but also emerges

out of a dialogic and transformative process of reconsidering and reorganizing lived experiences through the theoretical constructs and discourses that are publicly recognized and valued within the communities of practice that hold power (pp.240-241)

What Luke (2002) is calling for, then, sounds unfortunately like abstracted, codified dictates about how one should discursively conduct oneself and may or may not be applicable or appropriate in an individual's actual experiences. It is perhaps more useful to, for instance, document the following (among others)

minority discourses, diasporic voices, texts and statements that are 'written out' and over by dominant institutions

emergent discourses of hybrid identity generated by learners counter to dominant pedagogic discourses . . .

those micropolitical strategies of interruption, resistance and counter-discourse undertaken by speakers in face-to-face institutional and interpersonal settings (pp. 106-107)

To provide a descriptive record of these various activities seems to assume more of a sense of agency than Luke's other call to action wherein a decisive course of action is laid out. These goals allow Johnson's (2006) dialogic process (in this case, dialogue between the individual and

the dominant discourses exposed by the above practices) to take place and thus allows an individual to incorporate the strategies described (rather than ones that are *prescribed*) into her daily life and experiences by her own means. In this way, individuals may create or modify methods for exposing and subverting oppressive modes of discourse. The present study certainly demonstrates that individuals must grapple with their identities (and the effects of paradigms like native speaker superiority) in their own way, and this process can be full of false starts, leaps forward, backsliding and slow inching along.

### **Pedagogy and Praxis: Beyond a “Bag of Tricks”**

When teaching a graduate course on second-language teaching, I was amazed to find that my students’ chief complaint about the course was that it did not include a “bag of tricks” they could mine for activities to do in class the next day. We had spent time critically addressing what language teaching was and reading case studies of second-language speakers’ experiences—most notably by exploring *My Trouble is My English*, a seminal work by Fu (1995) that details the experiences of four Laotian refugees and in anecdotes detailed in Lippi-Green’s 1997 text *English with an Accent*. But they seemed at a loss as to how these reports of lived experience could be of any utility in their day-to-day teaching routines. Therefore, while I do not wish to carry out the very activity I have just critiqued in Luke’s (2002) call for dictating how things ought to be, there are implications for classroom practices that maybe of some utility in giving teachers fodder for their lived experiences—ideas to try out, reject, adapt or incorporate into their teaching.

One activity clearly advocated elsewhere in this dissertation is the process of showing students how to perform critical discourse analysis. Helping them learn to expose the common-sense notions that dominate the thinking on second-language speakers provides them with a site of struggle in which they can grapple with concrete examples of how these ideologies are enacted in everyday discursive practices. These kinds of activities could be done with second-language students, second-language teachers in training and undergraduates in courses on linguistics or in the humanities in general. Certainly this is not to suggest that every student perform a case-study of a second-language speaker (however revealing that might be). However, demonstrating ways to deconstruct texts and practicing these methods on the topic of second language, whether it be in textbooks, policies or in second-language speakers' own discourses can be revelatory in helping teachers become sensitized to the underlying ways various discourses are passed on.

#### Implications for Teacher Knowledge

By critically examining the language of scholarly articles or textbooks, for instance, budding teachers may discover that studies in second-language learning have generally assumed that “ultimate attainment” in a second language is characterized by replicating native speaker pronunciation. Whether or not they ultimately accept this ideology is not necessarily the point, however: the point is that this common-sense notion is made opaque and these teachers learn that it is possible that not all of their students have a desire to sound like native speakers of the language they are being taught. They can seek out ways to expand their teaching practice to help their students perform exploratory research and find non-native speakers who can be models for their linguistic performance.



Teachers and student teachers *can*, of course, perform case studies and/or read case studies other researchers have done. The present study, for instance, suggests that students like John and Yixuan are desperate to know more about pragmatics and how to talk to native speakers—appropriateness, both in terms of topics and lexical choice, emerge as areas where these students wish to know more. While lessons which specifically address topics one might discuss with native speakers, it might be more helpful for teachers to provide opportunities for their second-language students to learn how to find these answers on their own: they can record (or access recordings through corpora of spoken interactions) individuals’ conversations in the very contexts they want to be part of. Yixuan, for example, might listen closely to the native speaking undergraduates in her lab to get ideas about topics she might bring up in conversation. John actually did some of this action-oriented research—he began watching syndicated American television shows which, while not necessarily reflective of the kinds of situations he might find himself in, exposed him to the various kinds of things native speakers talked to each other about and the words they used in these conversations.

Another point this research makes may be of particular utility to those preparing international teaching assistants for the classroom. As Yixuan’s case revealed, the common advice given to native speaker teachers of college undergraduates is to keep themselves at a distance to assert their authority in the classroom. Some are even cautioned not to smile until after the Fall Break. Yixuan resisted this advice for the most part, and by the end she claimed that while their communication was still not optimal, it had gotten better. She claims that she and her students “got along with each other well” and that this camaraderie may have contributed to their improved ability to communicate (Interview 4, December 2004). Nisbett and Wilson’s (1977)

research on the “halo effect” supports this theory; they found that the accent of a non-native speaker who was friendly and warm with lecture students was reported to cause less frustration than when the same speaker displayed no positive affect. This apparent contribution of kind and affable behavior to positively influence native speakers’ judgments of non-native speaker speech might be useful in helping international teaching assistants adopt a pedagogical style they are comfortable with, and at the very least can help the teachers who are preparing them for the classroom understand that native speaker teacher/native speaker student dynamics may differ greatly from non-native teacher/native speaker student classroom interactions.

#### Implications for second-language students

Second-language students themselves can, as mentioned, learn to perform critical analyses of discourse themselves. A promising study by Cots (2006) lays out ways that methodologies laid out by other scholars can be adapted to provide students with the opportunity to critically examine texts. He first has students examine the text in terms of “social practice,” which is described as “how the text contributes to a particular representation of the world and whether this representation comes into conflict with their own representations” (pp. 339-340). He also has students examine ideological assumptions behind the text. The questions he puts to students to help them ferret out these notions are, for example, having students imagine who wrote the text and why they think so. Cots (2006) then advocates exploring “discourse practice,” which includes thinking about the genre of the text and the ways it draws on what readers of this genre are assumed to know. An example of a question designed to help investigate discourse practice is “where can you find a text like this? What kind of readers is it addressed to?” (p. 340). Finally,

he engages students in “textual practice” by drawing students’ focus to various forms such as modality and vocabulary. In examining a text about the Amish, one sample question is:

Look for examples in the text containing the verb *can/can’t*. What *can* the Amish do? What *can* the Amish *not* do? Next look for examples containing the verbs *have to* and *allow*, expressing obligation. What are the Amish obliged to do? (p. 340)

While this example may seem prescriptive, it can be seen as a jumping-off point for second-language teachers wishing to introduce their students to critical examinations of discourse. Teachers could examine articles written by first-language speakers about second-language speakers (a good example is breaking down the features of undergraduate students’ letters to university papers about their international teaching assistants, which seem to bubble up every year or so). They could even examine spoken discourse as is done in the present study.

#### Implications for native speaker students

Finally, native speaking students can be exposed to the ways language ideologies permeate societal views of second-language speakers. While the activities here target undergraduate students, they could be adapted for younger learners as well. One classroom activity I took part in as a novice graduate student turned out to be particularly eye-opening for me. The professor of the class had us read a chapter in Lippi Green’s (1997) *English with an Accent* that dealt with the use of accents in children’s films—most notably, Disney films. The effect of reading this (however codified) research was stunning; I had never before considered why “bad guys” in

Disney films seemed not only to be the only ones with identifiably “foreign” accents, but that these accents were usually those considered to have less prestige. For instance, the villain in *Aladdin* speaks English that is heavily influenced by sounds in Arabic, but the protagonists, Jasmine and Aladdin himself (who are also supposed to be Arabs, though they have much lighter skin than the other “Arab” characters) speak with Midwestern-sounding American accents. I found this research fascinating, and chose as my class project the investigation of the prosodic, phonemic and grammatical features employed by American actor Hank Azaria in providing the voice for Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the Indian convenience store clerk from the animated series *The Simpsons*. I found that he used surprisingly few features typically associated with Indian English, and this led to my interest in the intersection of accent discrimination and race. Such reading and research was invaluable to me in sensitizing me to the latent but pervasive ideology of accent discrimination and, consequently, the myth of native speaker superiority. Projects like this one could allow students to critically analyze discourse and help make visible the transparent common-sense notions operating “behind the scenes” of symbolic domination.

Another project that is adapted from one described in Leki (1995) would involve students’ taking on of a way of speaking that would be unexpected for their interlocutors. In Leki’s study, the assignment described is one developed by a Speech Pathology professor, in which students were assigned to pretend they had a stutter for a four-hour period in order to sensitize them to the experiences of their future clients. The reason this activity piqued my interest is because the student who was given this assignment is identified as a non-native speaker, and she admitted later that she scored well on the assignment but had not actually performed the activity of pretending to be a stutterer. She had, instead, drawn on her experiences as a foreign-accented

speaker to write her report of the experience. Interestingly, when this idea was proposed to a graduate course on second-language teaching, students reacted with righteous indignation that this student had “cheated” but had still received a favorable grade. This opened up a fruitful discussion of Leki’s student’s defense of her actions:

Her rationale was that her nonnative English speech was embarrassing enough to her and probably elicited responses that were similar to responses to the speech of a stutterer; and besides a real stutterer’s most prominent speech characteristic is to avoid talking at all, and that is what she did (p.244)

It is possible, then, that students may be able to learn about the life experiences of non-native speakers through reading studies like Leki’s, but the act of putting on a foreign accent for a few hours would likely provide insights not accessible through reading alone.

There are, perhaps, other ways this process might be made salient for students. In sensitizing undergraduate students in linguistics to the concept of accent discrimination, I began teaching the first day of my introductory linguistics class by speaking in my “first” dialect, typified by a strong Southern accent. We came to a point where we were discussing the phenomenon (described earlier) known as Foreign Accent Syndrome. Students were fascinated with this condition, and when I asked them about the social consequences a monolingual speaker of English might face if she suddenly spoke in a way that was identified to be “foreign,” they readily responded that there would be none. At that point, I switched from my Southern accent to one in which the identifiable features of Southern speech were no longer detectable. I asked them

if their opinion of me had changed when my accent did, and they confessed that it had. One student said she had even wondered if she should complain to the Dean about the “redneck” teaching her class. This event helped heighten their awareness to issues of accent discrimination, and even on the last day, a student remarked that it was the one activity in the course that had had the most impact on his thinking about language.

For some teachers, these activities may seem objectionable because in “putting on” a foreign accent, students may actually miss the point, and the activity would instead reify the power of the myth of native speaker superiority. Another assignment, then, could be to have students “shadow” a non-native speaker for a day and then critically analyze their experience to see what issues it may have raised in their thinking about second-language speakers.

### **Limitations and Challenges**

The main criticism of qualitative research is that it is not generalizable. That is certainly true for the present study; while it was fruitful to be able to explore themes that were shared among the participants, their approaches to them and their degree of success in doing what they felt they needed to do varied enormously. This research is broad, and it is not intended to pinpoint specific factors about language learning that could be operationalized and tested. Even the use of CDA, which helps makes sometimes ephemeral themes concrete, cannot help make this research quantitative. Knowing the number of times a participant collocated words representing positive affect with accent tells us virtually nothing, as it is the context in which these words are uttered that is the essential ingredient for meaning. And so it can be said that if a reader comes to this dissertation for ideas about second-language learning factors they would

like to test for—or even, look for in other qualitative data—they will come up wanting. While this study is *replicable*, the results will never be *reproducible*, even if the exact same data is collected from the exact same participants. If these exact results were to be reproduced, in fact, one would be doing something wrong, as the findings of this study, while anchored by rigorous methodologies, will float and drift depending on who is analyzing the data, since her or his lived experience and epistemological stance as well as the ideologies he or she assumes will all have a penetrating effect on the findings. This does not, however, invalidate the findings presented here. All knowledge-making is sifted through a researcher's mind, and trace evidence from a scholar's lived experience, common-sense notions and sense of identity filters down to every kind of research. One response to arguments about the inherent validity and reliability of purely quantitative research might be to paraphrase Jones's (2007) criticism about CDA that words are not racist, people are, in saying that no, numbers cannot be ideological, but people can—and are.

While CDA and its contribution to the field, as well as its promise for awareness-raising in second-language research and praxis has become the main thrust of this dissertation, the use of CDA with non-native speaker data does present some challenges, namely, the fact that the data is almost entirely spoken data from non-native speaker participants. On this issue, Seliger & Shohamy (1989) caution that, “the language used by the learners to describe their experiences is also language which, at that point, is still incompletely learned” (p. 120). While a great many debates could be had about the phrase “incompletely learned” (when *is* learning “complete?” what features make a language “incompletely learned?”), their point is fair: the speakers in this study were chosen because they are not native speakers of English, and as such, they may use English in novel ways which may be difficult to unravel or even interpret altogether. The forms

they use to *do* certain things with language may be different; their understandings of modality may not match the analyst's and so a "hidden meaning" uncovered from their use of forms may be a phantom (or worse, a projection from the researcher's own agenda). Take, for instance, the exchange between John and the researcher where he is asked if he thinks it would be worth it (ie, worth the effort he has said it would take) to change his accent, and he responds "Mm. (.) yes, *it would be very worth*" (Interview 1, February 2004). One might suggest that John omitted the "it" from the idiom *to be worth it* because he does not know this phrase or because he was simply parroting the interviewer. In either case, it is possible these data should have been "thrown out" since an altered form of an idiom was used and possibly muddled the meaning.

Shadow's use of English presents a number of the same challenges. In the first interview, she explains that "before I came here, I don't know I have many mistake, I have mistake in about my pronunciation" (Interview 1, February 2004). In the analysis of this statement, it was postulated that Shadow's use of the present tense constructions "don't" and "have" may mean she does not know the use of the past is indicated when talking about a time "before," even if what one is saying is that condition is still in place. In other words, if I appear at the Department of Motor Vehicles and am told I needed to bring a signed affidavit from my insurance company, I might say, "I didn't know I needed that!" My use of the past tense "needed" doesn't mean I do not still need it; it just means that at a point in the past, I didn't know it was needed. Shadow, however, may not know this is the case, and so her use of the present tense may be to indicate that she knows she still has mistakes. She may avoid the past tense here intentionally, in case it gives the wrong impression that she now thinks her mistakes were just in the past. Certainly she uses the



past tense often enough elsewhere, but all these attempts at analysis are just that—trying to figure out what she meant and whether she knew what other linguistic options existed.

Finally, Shadow uses the phrasal verb “patient to” in her statement that Americans “are very patient to me” (Questionnaire, July 2004). Again, it is likely that she is trying for the verb “to be patient with” and simply gets it wrong. But the critical discourse analyst may not be able to simply dismiss this data and ignore it because the grammar is unclear. Instead, she may (and, in fact, does) suggest that in casting around for a preposition to go with “patient,” Shadow grabs onto “to” for a reason, possibly because doing something *to* someone versus doing something *with* someone suggests two radically different power dynamics at work.

And thus it is that working with second-language speakers’ oral discourse can present such a challenge for CDA, and the choice to use such a form-based analytical technique here could be a very valid criticism of this study. However, in every case in which questions about lack of linguistic sophistication versus intentional meaning has occurred in this study, surrounding data and context were always consulted to see if the interpretations being extrapolated were reasonable and/or likely.

### **Future Research Roadmap: The Crossroads of Theory and Practice**

Putting research into practice is almost always suggested as the “next step” when one believes one has somehow created knowledge to be verified in praxis, specifically pedagogical practice. The call for further research here is somewhat different. My view of this dissertation is not that it has “built knowledge” that teachers should test in their classrooms; my intent is not to

have someone try out the suggested activity wherein undergraduate students follow a second-language speaker for a day and report back on whether or not it “worked.” My hope rather is that this dissertation provides a jumping-off point for research-practitioners: in seeing what has been done here, they find ways that doing these *kinds of things* (grounded theory analysis and critical discourse analysis, for example) they may find those tools helpful in creating their own research. In other words, if a teacher is interested in sensitizing her undergraduate students to accent discrimination, I hope she or he finds the tools here to create a study that uncovers the kinds of knowledge he or she needs for classroom practice. I hope I have argued that the utility of this study is less in the way it has answered research questions and more in the ways it has ratified the use of qualitative methods of analysis. Certainly it would be interesting to see a teacher document the process of having her second-language students learn to use discourse analysis to analyze spoken data—even canned passages from film or television. A study that explores techniques for helping international teaching assistants develop their own teaching style and identity by examining qualitative data would also be fascinating. But it is too easy, too pat to say, “Here is this research; now go and put it into practice; try these activities and see if they work.” Rather I would hope that the call for further research would be, “Think about what knowledge you want about your students, research participants or second-language learning in general. Use these tools to find what you are looking for.” Because it is only through our engagement in research that it can ever truly mean anything to us, and it is only through engagement with discourse that it can ever tell us anything.

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**APPENDIX**

Participant Questions: Summer 2004, for ESL study (IRB #17606)

*Please answer the following questions in as much detail as you can.*

**Section I: Questions about your daily life. These questions might seem odd, but they will help me to see what your normal daily life is like during the summer time. I think this could be important even though it doesn't directly relate to English, because I will know what kinds of interactions and activities are important to you, which may be relevant to the study.**

1. Describe what a typical day has been like for you this summer. Include details such as what time you get up, what you normally do, who you normally interact with, and what time you go to bed at night.
  
2. List the five people with whom you interact the most on a daily basis right now (you may give them 'other' names if you don't want to share their real name, or you can simply describe them by their relationship to you, ie 'my roommate,' 'my sister,' 'my coworker,' etc.). For each person, please provide the information in the grid. Use as much space as you need.

Your relationship to this person (coworker, sister, roommate, etc.)	How often do you interact with him/her? (2 hours/day, 5 hours/week, etc.)	Where you interact with him/her? (home, work, on the phone, etc.)	What do you usually talk about with this person?	What language(s) do you use with him/her?
Person #1				
Person #2				
Person #3				
Person #4				
Person #5				

3. List the 5 people whom you consider to be the most IMPORTANT people in your life. Some people may appear on the first grid (for instance, if your sister is very important to you, and you interact with her a lot, she may be on both lists) while others may not (For instance, your roommate may be someone with whom you interact a lot but may not be someone you consider very important in your life, so he/she might be on the first list but not the second. Or your grandfather may be someone whom you don't get to talk to a lot but who is still very important to you, so he might be on the second list but not the first). For each person, please provide information in the grid. Please use as much space as you want/need.

Your relationship to this person (coworker, sister, roommate, etc.)	How often do you interact with him/her? (once a month, 5/hrs/week, etc)	Where you interact with him/her? (when you go abroad, at work, on the phone, etc.)	What do you usually talk about with this person?	What language(s) do you use with him/her?
Person #1				
Person #2				
Person #3				
Person #4				
Person #5				

4. What's the BEST thing about summer for you? Why?

5. What's the WORST thing about summer for you? Why?

6. What are you looking forward to MOST in the fall semester? Why?

7. What are you looking forward to LEAST in the fall semester? Why?

**Section II: Questions about English and language. These questions will help me understand your reactions to language and your perception of other people's opinions about language.**

1. What do you think Americans think about foreign accent in general?

2. Are there certain foreign or regional American accents you really LIKE? Why?

3. Are there certain foreign or regional American accents you really DISLIKE? Why?
4. What do you think most Americans think about your accent? Why do you think this?
  
5. In which situation(s) do you feel LEAST comfortable using English? Why?
  
6. In which situation(s) do you feel MOST comfortable using English? Why?
  
7. What's the most difficult part about speaking English? Why?
  
8. What is your reaction to a foreigner who speaks your first language with an accent (like a French or American or Japanese person speaking your first language)? Why do you feel this way?
  
9. What is your reaction to other ESL speakers whose accent sounds more American than yours? What do you think of them? Why?
  
10. What is your reaction to ESL speakers whose accent sounds LESS American than yours? What do you think of them? Why?
  
11. Many ESL students say their ESL classes are not useful. Please describe what you would do if you could plan the 'perfect' ESL class. What kinds of activities would you do? What would you spend the most time doing? How long would the classes be and how often would they meet? You may assume that there are no time/money restrictions.

## Vita—Stefanie Rehn

### Education

- 2010 PhD in Applied Linguistics, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA  
1997 M.A. in English, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA  
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### Professional Experience

- 2006-present Researcher and Curriculum Outreach Director, Waterford Institute, Salt Lake City, UT  
2004 Lecturer, Department of Applied Linguistics, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA  
2002-2003 ESL Officer, Smeal College of Business, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA  
2000-2004 Teaching Assistant, Applied Linguistics, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA  
1998-1999 Teacher Trainer, Nauczycielskie Kolegium Języków Obcych (College for Teachers of Foreign Languages), US Peace Corps, Suwałki, Poland  
1997-1998 TESOL Instructor, Department of English, Warren Wilson College, Swannanoa, NC  
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### Selected Publications and Presentations

- Golombek, P. and Rehn Jordan, S. (2005) Becoming “black lambs” not “parrots”: A poststructuralist orientation to intelligibility and identity. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39 (3).
- Johnson, K., Rehn Jordan, S. and Poehner, M. (2005) The TOEFL trump card: An investigation of test impact in an ESL classroom. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 2 (2) 71-94.
- Rehn Jordan, S. (2005). Review of War of Words: Language, politics and 9/11 by Sandra Silberstein. *The Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, 4 (2), 173-177.
- Negeureula, E., Lantolf, J., Rehn Jordan, S. and Gelabert, J. (2004). The “private function” of gesture in second language speaking activity: a study of motion verbs and gesturing in English and Spanish. *The International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 14 (1)
- May 2004. “Ideologies and Agency: A New Approach to the ITA Issue.” Annual meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Portland, OR