



From Lelia's and Mrs. Albrecht's Classrooms to Explore Who is the Native Speaker

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Abstract: Chang-Rae Lee's novel, *Native Speaker*, narrates the story of the protagonist from a first-person perspective. Through observing his wife's teaching instructions, Henry recalls his own experiences in an English classroom during his youth, where Mrs. Albrecht's harsh methods and classmates' mockery eroded his confidence and even caused serious anxiety. The descriptions of Mrs. Albrecht's classroom demonstrate the traumatic experience of marginalized immigrant children. Henry Park, a 1.5 generation of Korean-American immigrant, imitates a polished English accent to be assimilated into American mainstream society. However, his excessive carefulness to details prevents him from becoming a true "native speaker", and from the inner world, he is simultaneously influenced by both Korean culture and American culture. Henry's "dual identity" leads him to be employed by an immigration intelligence agency, and he is assigned to infiltrate the camp of Korean-American politician--John Kwang, a candidate for the city mayor. In his interactions with John Kwang, Henry is confronted with an identity crisis as an Asian-American. Consequently, the issues of language, identity, and the political rights of minority ethnic groups arise.

Keywords: identity, native speaker

Introduction

The title of this novel, *Native Speaker*, holds significant meaning. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "Native Speaker" refers to someone who has spoken a particular language since they were a baby, rather than having learned it as a child or adult. It pertains to an individual who has been speaking a specific language since infancy, as opposed to acquiring it during childhood or adulthood. According to this criterion, Lelia, Henry's wife, meets this definition due to her Scottish-American background, while Henry is excluded because his native language is Korean, despite being born in the United States, which barely qualifies him for the title of "native speaker." For instance, he struggles when speaking English, pronouncing "riddle" as "liddle" and similar mistakes. He is constantly worried about making such errors, fearing they may harm his work or personal life. In Lelia's eyes, Henry is seen as "a new American, a stranger, a traitor, a spy." The racial discrimination he faces from his wife partly stems from the perceived authority associated with the notion of a native speaker. "The discourse of native speakerism is made of the following assumptions: that 'native' speakers are the authorities on the language and enjoy superior competence, that those who use it as an additional language have to treat 'native' speaker competence as the target; and that 'native' speakers are the best qualified to teach that language."^[1] There exists an inherent superiority among native speakers. It influences Henry as if it were an invisible enchantment. Native speakerism is based on certain assumptions: that those identified as native speakers possess superior language skills and authoritative knowledge, and that non-native speakers should aspire to achieve a level of proficiency equivalent to native speakers.

This article provides analysis from the perspective of "language imperialism" to expose the American mainstream society employing "standard English" as a tool to impose racial and class segregation, trapping minority ethnic groups in unjust language and social contexts where they become "silent" and "invisible". It can be stated that English, utilizing structural and cultural inequalities, has established and perpetuated a long-standing hegemony over other languages, thus constituting linguistic imperialism, and seeks to sustain the unequal allocation of power and privilege. The truth, order, and knowledge in American society are established through the use of "standard English", while the languages of ethnic minorities and the cultural, historical, and values they carry are marginalized and pushed to the periphery. The marginalization of minority languages undermines the integrity of ethnic cultures and suppresses their mother tongues. "Loss of a heritage language (and the related spread today of world Englishes) raises doubts about identity"^[2] As a result, ethnic minorities lose agency over language use and the means to seek self-identity. They are compelled to internalize the culture and values carried by English, leading to psychological trauma caused by the lost identity. The novel "Native Speaker" portrays the marginalized and concealed predicament of ethnic minorities in their struggle for the right to speak, suppressed by the dominance of "standard English." It uncovers the exploitative power of American hegemony, where English is employed to perpetuate racial and class divisions and enforce political oppression and economic exploitation. However, in the globalized era, linguistic imperialism controlled by English is no longer invulnerable. The end of the novel demonstrates a scene: how ethnic minority immigrants construct fluid and multilingual languages in their social lives, challenging the existing English hegemony and the dominant power behind it, to establish their own identity as native speakers and the subjectivity of ethnic minority.



1. Mrs. Albrecht's Classroom — the Silence and Marginalized Under the Impact of English Hegemony

“Linguistic imperialism, it fleshes out and animates anglocentricity, and describes the consequences for the dominant and dominated languages and for the individual. His description is reminiscent of the way in which racism is affirmed and stresses the tenacity of this form of ideological reproduction.”^[3] Linguistic imperialism effectively illustrates and gives vitality to the dominance of English, highlighting the effects on both dominant and marginalized languages, as well as on individuals. It can be said that language is the embodiment of history, ideology, and even political and economic systems. Language is not merely a medium of communication or a system of symbols; it also intervenes in the construction of social relations and signifies the establishment of social order. When a specific language occupies the dominant position of control, it creates an unequal distribution of discursive power and profoundly influences the formation of knowledge and the emergence of ideologies.

Western literary classics, as the carriers of culture, coexist with hegemonic English. Henry's English training in middle school is precisely instructed by “that ancient chalk-white woman taught me with a polished fruitwood stick”, which represents the aim to cultivate obedient subjects who accept mainstream ideologies and are easy to control through “standard English”. In class, Mrs. Albrecht eloquently recites classic poems by Peanut Butter Shelley, using English as a tool that both conquers the other and constructs its norms, achieving language assimilation and ideological production. Mrs. Albrecht, with her “diaper-smelling, bony hands”, when demands Henry to recite the poem, Henry experiences a sense of “choke, stumble inside myself”, “And this was her therapy, struck in sublime meter on my palms and the backs of my calves.”^[4] Mrs. Albrecht expects Henry to mimic it to perfect his pronunciation and intonation. As a result, Henry develops a serious anxiety, “I'd murmur beneath my breath, unable to remember all the poet's womanly names.” From this part, we can see that Mrs. Albrecht's English classroom is a carrier of the privileged consciousness inherent in the English language, by this way the power diffuses its dominant effect through visual and auditory supervision, influencing individuals and domesticating the marginalized. Thus, even when free from Mrs. Albrecht's monitoring, Henry, during the English recitation break, rehearses in front of the mirror, repeatedly mimicking the prescribed pronunciation, intonation, and body movements. Henry's process of acquiring English fully demonstrates how the dominating power assimilates ethnic minorities into the representation of the American ideological discourse. The hegemonic force of standard English erodes Henry's thoughts, behaviors, and speech in all aspects, feeling completely dominated by the ideology carried by the English. Undoubtedly, her classroom reflects the impact of English hegemony on the silent and marginalized.

As a spy, his professional success stemmed from “my actions as a solid textbook,” meanwhile, Henry's espionage activities can be seen as a metaphor for his struggle to find a sense of belonging within American society. But he couldn't express himself, partly due to Park's father's creed, becoming a model minority, making assimilation a virtue, providing for the family, and excelling at his job; partly because of the psychological shadow from Mrs. Albrecht's classrooms, “my tongue would tie in the initial attempts...Native speakers may not fully know this”; “Kids would call me 'Marble Mouth'.” These anxieties show the tendency that he was assimilated by the ideology carried by English from an early age and gradually lose self-confidence and courage to speak. “...in Africa, very few national languages are official languages, and the usual practice of the majority of our states is to honor the foreign European languages... the result is that the linguistic heritage of the nation is undervalued and marginalized.” This situation occurs in every group where unequal relationships exist. Consequently, the linguistic heritage of the ethnic minority is devalued and marginalized. The protagonist's silence and marginalized existence reveal that under the oppression of English hegemony, ethnic minorities not only lose their identity to self-expression but also cannot escape the fate of exploitation and oppression, leading to Henry's adult status “I am hardly seen.”

NYC is full of immigrants from all over the world. “the ‘Spanish’ ones were harder working, ...because they didn't speak English too well, just like us. ...to hire somebody if they don't speak English, even blacks from Haiti or Ethiopia, because he figured they were new to the land and understood that no one would help them for nothing”. Despite the voices of various languages echoing on every street corner, immigrants who cannot master English are confined to terrible living conditions, enduring economic exploitation, and even facing life-threatening situations. In the novel, the local news station broadcasts a series of taxi driver murders in NYC, with the victims almost “recently arrived Latvians, Jamaicans, Pakistanis, Hmong”. Sadly, these immigrant cabbies, risking their lives by venturing into crime-ridden areas for their livelihood suffered violent harm. “You are your cheapest labor. Here is the great secret”. Henry points out that the tragedy of these cabbies stems from the language communication barrier, as they are unable to plead for mercy in English, unable to make the killer understand what they can do to save their lives. “I wonder if the Cuban could even beg for his life so that the killer might understand. What should he do? Have mercy, should be the first lesson in this city, how to say the phrase instantly in forty signs and tongues”. For newly arrived immigrants in America, pleading for mercy in danger is the most urgent lesson for survival. However, dominated by English hegemony, they are stripped of their right to life. Henry thus recognizes that in the social context dominated by English hegemony, the languages of ethnic minority groups are suppressed, and the subjunctives of the speech are also silenced and concealed, which leads to the absence of justice and mercy.

2. Lelia's Classroom--Reconstruction of the Multilingual Community and Identity of Native Speaker

“The discourse of native speakerism is made of the following assumptions: that ‘native’ speakers are the authorities on the language and enjoy superior competence, that those who use it as an additional language have to treat ‘native’ speaker competence as the target; and that ‘native’ speakers are the best qualified to teach that language”. “Native Speaker”, to some extent reveals how white-dominated power utilizes English hegemony to deprive the ethnic minority groups of their “claiming right to speak”, and put them in a desperate situation caused by “silence” and “invisibility”.

After experiencing a series of life changes, Henry realizes the absurdity and unreliability of ethnic minorities' attempts to assimilate themselves into American mainstream society through "standard English". He embarks on a journey to redefine "native speaker" and reestablish his own identity. To save his marriage, Henry resigns from his spy job and becomes an assistant in Lelia's language therapy, which can be seen as the critical point of self-awareness. Lelia's students are mostly immigrant children who have recently arrived in America. Lelia's teaching is innovative. "The alternative response of engaging creativity with languages assumes a different set of values: namely, those subjects have the agency to think critically and work out ideological alternatives that favor their empowerment; that although language may suppress people, it also has the liberatory potential of facilitating critical thinking"^[5]. It tells us that Lelia's unique classroom can inspire critical thinking among immigrant children and enables them to find their self-identity through language.

Her classroom is radically different from Mrs. Albrecht's. Firstly, Lelia's classroom atmosphere is relaxed, enjoyable, and highly humane. "she uses the class list to write their names inside the sunburst-shaped badge. Everybody, she says, has been a good citizen"^[6]. Secondly, unlike the strict Mrs. Albrecht speech, Lelia uses "buck-toothed puppets with big mouths, scary masks, make the talk unserious and fun". Lelia's classroom is against the oppression of minority speech by the use of "standard English", "She wants them to know that there is nothing to fear, she wants to offer up a pale white woman horsing with the language to show them it's fine to mess it all up", Henry must be moved when he hears Lelia "call out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent... a dozen lovely and native language, calling all different names of who we are". Lelia imitates the pronunciation of the ethnic groups' languages and sincerely calls out the different ethnic children's names, thereby preserving the heterogeneity of ethnic names, so that ethnic languages also have the equal role of English, allowing ethnic minority students to affirm their uniqueness. "How can anyone be an expert on the language learning needs, steps, and strategies of a set of learners without in-depth knowledge of the culture and language that the learners bring with them to the classroom and the learning operation?"^[7] Thus Lelia encourages Henry, "You just say what you want. Please say what you want"^[8].

To overcome the discrimination imposed by English hegemony, and to foster better interaction with the immigrant children in the classroom, Henry acts in his role as "Speech Monster". The role of "Speech Monster" creates a window opportunity for Henry, for he finally sheds the burden of "English hegemony" imposed upon him--no longer needing to wear the "false mask of the model minority" and speak the "Henry language" to try to survive in American mainstream society. In this process opened up by the Speech Monster, Henry breaks the confines of English hegemony, shattering the control of the previous false creeds: "From the very start we don't wish to be rude or inconsiderate, so we stay silent in our guise"; "a good lesson in restraint". After class, Henry engages in conversations with Ouboume's father, who is a Laotian immigrant. Despite numerous grammar mistakes, such as using "Korea" to refer to Korean people and praising John Kwang as a "big man"^[9], Henry can understand the appreciation and affirmation conveyed by the father. While conversing with Mrs. Fermin, a Muslim immigrant, he realizes that although her English grammars are disordered, Henry "I think she's saying it perfectly, just like she should", all of which led him to the realization that "When you are too careful you can't say anything". This experience prompts him to redefine the significance of "speaking in one's mother tongue" as a means of expressing acceptance and mutual understanding. As a result, Henry redefines the significance of being a "native speaker"-- "You can't imagine the play of the words in your head. You can't hear them, and they all sound like they belong to somebody else". Anyone who dares to use language, can hear language operating in their mind, and turns language into a form of communicative way is the "native speaker".

Henry ultimately breaks the "speechless silence." He no longer consciously hides his accent and deeply misses his deceased father, who spoke English with a heavy Korean accent. Henry confesses, "I would give most anything to hear my father's talk again...I will listen for him forever in the streets of this city. I want to hear the rest of them". "The rest of the city's sounds" refers to the mother tongues of immigrants, symbolizing New York as a "city of words," filled with various languages.

3. Conclusion

This novel truly reflects the living conditions and survival confusion of Asian Americans, and the experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion from American mainstream society. The protagonist is forced to face the issue of identity reconstruction by thinking deeply about what a "native speaker" is. At the end of the novel, Henry goes back to Lelia, gradually he finds an answer from Lelia's classroom. By making a comparison between Lelia's and Mrs. Albrecht's classroom teaching, Henry tries to explore the impact of the hegemonic status of English in American mainstream society. "There exists the inherent superiority among 'native' speakers". The novel argues that in the American mainstream society, English goes beyond its symbolic function and becomes a tool for racial and class discrimination. "Loss of a heritage language (and the related spread today of world Englishes) raises doubts about identity", "The fundamental opposition between native and non-native speakers, it is concluded, is one of power."^[10] Due to childhood trauma, Henry values English more than Korean, gradually losing the means to seek self-identity through language and being forced to define himself using standard English. He associates "standard English" with his identity and desperately seeks to assimilate into the white community, but his excessive caution only intensifies his anxiety and self-doubt, "I will always make bad errors of speech"^[11]. As a result, his identity becomes "silent and invisible."

"Many African and Indian sociolinguistics have specifically contributed to identifying the mechanisms and ideologies of linguistic imperialism." , "I would also claim they have an ethical responsibility to articulate anti-linguistic policies that can serve to promote social justice". For ethnic minority groups, their native languages are the fundamental condition for achieving cultural and individual identity construction. Through participating in Lelia's teaching process, Henry gradually seeks a break from the "standard English", discarding the halo of being a model minority and getting close to the real lives

of immigrants. Henry sincerely listens to the voices of immigrant communities which he consciously rejected before. Henry's contemplation begins with the observation of the Laotian twin boys and their father. Although they can only speak basic English vocabulary and make many grammatical errors, they always say "No problem, no problem!", and happily sing folk songs from their homeland during break time. "Through the types of fluid interaction we see between languages in various domains, English is also getting more hybridized than ever before"^[12]. This leads Henry to reflect on the origins of ancient Rome and realize that the United States should also possess the openness and inclusiveness of the Roman Empire. "Ancient Rome was the first true Babel. NYC must be the second. No doubt the last will be Los Angeles".

"The implication of these new linguascapes is that English is getting deterritorialized. It loses its identity as belonging to certain traditional 'homes'(the UK or USA). More importantly, it is losing its identity as a language belonging to the inner circle". It seems that the hegemonic status enforced by standard English is no longer unassailable. "The shift from modernist globalization to postmodern globalization ushers in new relations for languages and communities"^[13]. The fluid lingua scapes demand ethnic minorities to boldly establish their positions of self-expression, resisting the normative values constructed by the hegemonic English symbol. To shape social life, they project any traces of local culture or language involved in suppressing or obliterating and reconstructing the true meaning of "native speakers", the diverse language discourses, and being the native speaker of their languages.

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