Chapter 6

# Re–Examining the "Native Speaker Question":
## Representing Native Speakers on an ELT Website

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter addresses the native speaker question and construct from a representational point of view. Through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of an ELT website in China's context, the authors discuss what and who is profiled as 'native speaker' and how this category is represented on the website. Existing studies dealing with the 'native speaker' abound, but only in recent years have a few efforts been made on the construction of this discourse, and the online representation of ELT in China is worthy of more examination. Consequently, this chapter aims to problematize the term 'native speaker', deconstruct the process of how a discourse of 'native speaker' takes on shape through online representation, and reveal how it is a racialized category. In conclusion, they offer pedagogical and policy implications.*

## INTRODUCTION

The 'native speaker question'[1] has been around for a long period in linguistic and language education arenas. As Alan Davis (2003) has shown, the term 'native speaker' has even a longer genealogy and it is certainly not without controversy (see also next section of this chapter). Its definition, especially in the context of English language teaching (ELT), can be hardly pinned down (Ibrahim, 1999) and its legitimacy is questioned by varied scholars (Cook, 1999; Rampton, 1990). "The terms 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker'," argues Brandt (2006), "suggest a clear-cut distinction that doesn't really exist" (p. 15). In other words, 'native speaker' is not as obvious a term, yet it seems to have been naturalized and persisted in the language use of professionals and scholars (Medgyes, 2001). Moreover, when it comes to ELT, 'native speakers' are often positioned as the ideal teachers, superior to their 'non-native' counterparts (Phillipson, 1992). Specific to the ELT recruitment process, the native status is attributed with superiority and valued more than the professional qualifications (Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Selvi, 2010). According to Amin (2001), a worldwide phenomenon in the field of ELT is the link between native speakers and Whiteness, a link, which we will address in this chapter, that results in discriminatory perceptions and prejudice against 'native speakers' of color. One cannot help but wonder, how has the 'native speaker' without a solid theoretical support been naturalized and become a substance in practices and how come that its attributed superiority is so widely accepted and deeply engrained in this profession? The aim of this chapter therefore is to problematize the term 'native speaker,' deconstruct the process of how the native speaker discourse takes on shape through online representations and reveal how it is a racialized category.

Taking the *British Council in China* website as a site of analysis, we want to revisit the 'native speaker' question by asking: from a representational point of view, who is a native speaker?; and how are they represented? Put otherwise, what are the different 'representational tools' that are used to represent them authoritatively, and in the process, and as a result, who is included in these representations and who is excluded, how and why? Our analysis show, even when you are proven to be grammatically incorrect, if you are mostly male, White and assumed to be of British origin (through your accent), then you are a native speaker. One may argue that it is a British Council website, so it is not surprising that speakers' talk uses British accent. We concur. What is of interest to us is the mechanism, what we are calling 'representational tools,' through which the category is represented, assumed, reproduced, and thus naturalized. Using critical discourse analysis, we show that these representational tools 'create' (Hall, 2013) a racialized White and mostly male category that speaks with authority from an authorized space (Bourdieu, 1991).

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