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Anthropology News



On Being a Near-Native Speaker

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

Anna M Babel

On my recent trip to Bolivia, my mother-in-law looked at me curiously, then commented, “You know, Anna, you sound *almost* just like us. But there’s always *something*; there’s always some *little* thing...” she shook her head, as if trying and failing to put her finger on what, exactly, made me different.



The author and her family at the baptism of her godson. Photo courtesy Maricel Fiorela Gutierrez Avila

While the insider/outsider dichotomy in anthropological fieldwork has been critiqued (eg, [Narayan 1993](#)), it remains a compelling discourse about the way we develop perspectives on our research. To mention two examples, in a recent issue of *Anthropology News*, Kelly Fayard gives a rosy view of her fieldwork with family members in Poarch, Alabama ([10/21/2013](#)); Erika Hoffman-Dilloway’s review of current books in linguistic anthropology notes a tendency towards “convergence between subject, author, and audience” ([10/1/2013](#)). This column is a discussion of how the categories of *insider* and *outsider* have been complicated and foregrounded in my personal and professional life.

Echoing my mother-in-law, a line on my CV identifies me as a “near-native” speaker of Spanish. What does it mean, within the context and confines of this insider/outsider frame, to apply this label to myself? I am an outsider to my field site in terms of nationality, class, ethnicity and upbringing, but an insider in that I work with people who are part of my family. When I call myself “near-native,” I sometimes think of it not only in terms of the conventional meaning of being close to that Platonic ideal of a fully competent native speaker, but also in terms of being close to a native—my husband, in whose hometown I do my research.

The dialect of Spanish that I speak is one that I often euphemistically describe as a “non-prestige” variety. To be more precise, it’s a manner of speaking that educated Spanish speakers hear as rural, uneducated, lower-class, and above all, incorrect. Despite the fact that I’m a Spanish professor, *this* is the variety that I’m nearest to being native in. I have struggled to acquire the educated variety that my colleagues speak and that my students often expect, and I speak this prestige variety imperfectly. Spanish-speaking academic audiences, including many of my own graduate students, find my accent cute or quaint. For many years, the first comment after my academic conference presentations in Spanish was an observation about the dialect I used.

This attitude is not limited to academic audiences. In daily interactions in urban areas of Bolivia, I have to be careful how native-like I sound; though I am tall and light-complexioned for a Bolivian, my manner of speaking means that it is easy for people in positions of petty authority (airline clerks, shopkeepers, minor government functionaries) to perceive me not as *speaking* like a peasant but as *being* a peasant, and to treat me carelessly, rudely. When I am recognized as a foreigner, suddenly doors open, flight attendants smile, official wheels are greased.

When my husband and I travel together in Bolivia, we cultivate the signs of the urban middle class, such as his intellectual-looking glasses and my blue passport, which hotel clerks photocopy and register for official purposes. But when we travel with his family, who do not have access to these signs, they are uniformly ignored, mistreated and marginalized. On one trip that we took with my husband's grandparents, we complained to a hostel manager about being assigned a storage closet to sleep in instead of a guest room. As if it explained everything, the manager told me, gesturing at the older couple, "But you were supposed to give that room to *them*."

The fact that I can opt out of this treatment by putting on an American accent and wearing typical tourist clothing such as t-shirts and sneakers—my position of privilege—means that no matter how well I speak this variety of Spanish, despite speaking it on a daily basis for thirteen years, despite being able to pass under certain circumstances as a native speaker, despite the fact that it is the language I use to bicker with my husband and tell my children that I love them when I tuck them into bed at night, I cannot claim it as *my* variety without encountering reactions ranging from skepticism to indignation to derision. These reactions are different than the amusement that my accent generates in professional circles, precisely because people have difficulty accepting it as mine in that context.

I have encountered a range of reactions from academics who have reviewed my scholarly work. Many reviewers have challenged my use of kin terms such as *husband* and *mother-in-law* rather than the more comfortable *key informant* or *consultant*, arguing that the latter terms are somehow more professional. I am required to provide pseudonyms for my consultants, despite the fact that (with their permission) I identify them by their very personal relationships to me. And oddly, despite the fact that I am quite a proficient writer of academic English, many reviewers' comments indicate that they assume that I am not a native speaker of my own native language. Since this has never occurred in any other context, I can only assume that it is related to my open discussion of my family ties in Bolivia. Being a near-native speaker has made me less a native of my own native tongue.

As blurry as insider and outsider can get, being near-native is a little like being a number approaching infinity—no matter how far I go or how near I get, I'm never going to lose that tell-tale little thing that sets me ever-so-slightly apart. At the same time, I've encountered nothing so delicate as managing a relationship with a key informant who is also my mother-in-law and the grandmother of my children. Anyone who has done long-term fieldwork has experienced this in-between state to some degree, and I don't think that I'm unusual among anthropologists in feeling a displacement in my own identity. But if there's anything I've learned as a linguistic anthropologist, it's that the words we use to talk about our experiences matter. When we say near, *how* near? And when we say native, *of what?*

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[Naiwa Adra](#) says:

December 20, 2014 at 12:04 pm

Babel's article is an excellent example, both of the power of language and the ways that perceptions of relative status impact behavior. I, too, learned the local dialect of Arabic when I first conducted fieldwork in rural Yemen in 1978-79. I studied this dialect carefully as part of my research. Now that this

dialect has changed toward more standard forms of Arabic, younger members of the local community find it hilarious that I am still using words their grandmothers use.

But I also speak an elite dialect of Turkish spoken by Ottomans in diaspora as late as my parents' generation, although their families left Turkey in the early 1920s. I was surprised at the doors this dialect opened for me when I visited Istanbul two months ago. Although my experience is the converse of Babel's, it is another demonstration of the ways language, and presumably the non-verbals that accompany language, are assumed to reflect identity and social status.

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