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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to Claire Kramsch's essay on the demise of the notion of the idealized native speaker as the model for second language learning and implications for second languages and cultures education. Focusing on the nonnative speaker of Russian and Russian language education in the United States, it asserts that both the quantity and quality of Russian presented to a learner may be entirely dependent on the learner's particular instrumental needs and desires to use the language. It discusses the issue of privilege among nonnative speakers of Russian and notes that the number and type of heritage speakers of Russian in the United States continues to grow, suggesting that issues of "nativeness" and nonnativeness" of speech will have an increasing impact on school curricula, textbooks, and programs. It concludes that for Russian and other less commonly taught languages in the United States, this movement toward accommodating the privileged nonnative speaker may turn out to be key to keeping such programs viable and productive. (SM)

Privilege (or *Noblesse Oblige*) of the Nonnative Speaker of Russian

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In his 1885 essay, Leo Tolstoy poses the moral and ethical question to his Russian readership: "How much land does a person need?" For the purposes of responding to Kramsch's "The Privilege of the Non-Native Speaker," I would recast this question as "How Much Russian Does an American Learner Need?" In both instances the answer to each question rests with the goals of the individual being asked. Ultimately, Kramsch's proposition is good news for students of foreign languages, and especially of the so-called less commonly taught languages (LCTLs).

In the area of Russian language education in the US, there is no question that the target audience of instruction as evidenced by the limited textbooks available until the 1980s was primarily the student-philologist: the language and literature specialist in training. That is, the student of Russian in the 1960s and 1970s was presumed to be a future teacher of the language and/or literature. Thus the content of instruction was narrowly proscribed vocabulary and grammar that would be used primarily in academic settings. Texts, reading and exercise materials were centered on academic environments and high culture artifacts and behaviors. Brecht (1995) documents a noticeable shift away from the language-specialist mission that was borne from the Sputnik generation of the 1950s and continued through the 1970s towards an applied-language mission: students who intend to use the language in one or another context. So prevalent was this assumption of a "universal" student of Russian that the best selling textbook for most of the 1970s and 1980s in the U.S. was titled *Russian for Everybody* (Kostomarov 1988). This text package consisted of a unified program of instruction in Russian with commentaries in German, English, French and Spanish. No specific recommendations for individual languages or learners were provided and the underlying assumption was that all students of Russian needed the same type of

instruction. But as the insularity of the Soviet Union began to soften in the mid-1980s and more and more students of Russian began to travel to and study in country, these notions of "one learner/one native speaker" quickly came into question.

The issues raised in Kramsch's provocative piece begin with the very notion of what a native speaker is. Kramsch correctly asserts that native speakership is not merely a birthright. The factors of social class and consequently education of the speaker condition the language of the "native" speaker. Indeed, both the FSI/ILR and ACTFL guidelines have, in many ways, confounded the issue of what is a reasonable goal of foreign language study for an American student—especially in the LCTLs. Given that the upper scales describe not only a native speaker but a "fully educated" native speaker, should this be a goal for our students of Russian? Indeed, by such a definition a sizeable percentage of many populations would not be "5" or "Distinguished" level speakers of their birth language. In the United States, for example, there are many areas in which Pratt's (1987) definition of "language" is *not* the norm (e.g., international border areas, rural communities, etc.). In such cases, many native-born U.S. citizens would not rate high on the FSI/IRL scale, given the grammaticality and lexical choices in their "native" language. As a case in point, my own parents, Mexican Americans born in south Texas, spoke both English and Spanish at home. However, neither was a "5" in either language due to limitations in their education and the particular idiolects of both languages. Yet they were unquestionably native speakers of both languages. Would their languages be inappropriate sources for students of English or Spanish? Not at all, if the students were planning to work or study near the Texas-Mexican border or read literature of excellent border writers such as Laura Esquivel or Luis Valdéz. Only recently, though, have Spanish language textbooks in this country begun to include what was routinely referred to as "substandard" variants of the language in their presentations of readings and other texts for study. While the notion that there are "Spanishes" (i.e., Iberian, Caribbean, Mexican, South and Central American) which share basic similarities but are differentiated lexically, phonologically and conversationally has long been accepted and even embraced by textbook writers, the inclusion of *intra*language variants has not been so readily accepted. It is interesting to note here that the popular and well received Spanish language video series *Destinos* (Van Patten, et al. 1991) includes samples of both national and social variants of Spanish in its contents.

One certainly can speak of "Englishes" as well, citing British, U.S., Australian, Indian, Canadian among others; but only in the last decade have EFL and ESL textbooks begun to include materials from the

periphery of the accepted "norm" for students to consider in their study. But it is not necessary to cross national borders to encounter variants of English. Within any English-speaking environment one may face a plethora of "native" variants of the language. Indeed, to read Twain or Faulkner requires a decent comprehension of the regional dialect of the American South.

Perhaps the most obvious response to Kramsch's apt comments on the necessity to recognize a multiplicity of "native speakers" in the FL classroom is the incorporation of carefully selected authentic materials as basic texts of instruction. Through such materials, students are no longer forced to consume only one canonical variant of native speech, but may be exposed to and understand a variety of native variants reflecting the natural breadth of a language within different social and cultural contexts. The use of such texts has been much discussed in the FL teaching literature during the past decade, but perhaps now deserves to be revisited in the context of providing our students with more useful and relevant language samples for their consideration. Indeed, by combining the inclusion of appropriate authentic texts with the consideration of individual learner styles and needs, we may actually find ourselves doing a much better job in attracting and retaining students, especially in the LCTLs. Recent research in individual learner styles and preferences has prompted some authors of Russian language materials to include self-diagnostic instruments in their textbooks to help students facilitate their learning and study of the language (See Davidson, et al. 1996.) Such a move toward increased learner autonomy is also supported in Kramsch's description of native speaker privilege. As we move away from a conception of an idealized native speaker guiding our textbooks and language learning materials, we move closer to the determination of particular native speech desired and needed by our students and a very different kind of "X-for-special-purposes" language course. Rather than considering only the area of specialization of the learner, we also consider "the multiple possibilities for self-expression" of our students," as Kramsch puts it. On this level, the status of the learner as a nonnative speaker not only privileges the student, but essentially puts her in the rarified position of individualized learner, a position of both honor and obligation which should encourage students to pursue study of the LCTLs in our institutions.

Returning to the question "How Much Russian Does an American Learner Need?," one can now with greater confidence assert that both the quantity and the quality of the Russian presented to a learner may be entirely dependent on her particular instrumental needs and desires to use the language. As Polinsky (2000) points out, as the number

and type of heritage speakers of Russian in the U.S. continues to grow, these issues of "nativeness" and "nonnativeness" of speech will not only remain with us, but have an increasing impact on our curricula, textbooks and programs. For Russian and other LCTLs taught in the United States, this movement towards accommodating the privileged nonnative speaker may turn out to be the key to keeping our programs viable and productive.

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