

The effects and functions of speaker status in CALL-oriented communities

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Abstract. Do you know how to change your relationship status on Facebook? What about your language status? In most web 2.0 contexts, music preference or relationship status are more important than information about one's linguistic repertoire. In language learning communities and affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), however, language status is forefronted. This contribution will look at the function of 'native-speakerness' and 'language-learnerness' in a wide variety of CALL-oriented online communities and affinity spaces (online forum, massive open online course (MOOC), blogging community, other) from two different perspectives: (a) User settings: How is language status established in language learning communities? What affordances (e.g. user profile) are available for 'setting' one's language status, and what assumptions about native-speakerness underlie them? (b) Affordances: What effects do language status settings have on the user experience via such means as information filtering and availability of specific affordances? The paper aims to begin a discussion about the effect of language status attributions on learners as well as the pedagogical and linguistic assumptions behind the ways in which these services 'put the native speaker into the product'.

Keywords: native speaker, non-native speaker, blog, MOOC, forum, tandem.

1. Introduction

In most web 2.0 contexts, what languages you speak at which level and at which point in your life you acquired them are less important than your gender, age, or your music preference. In language learning communities and affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) though, your language status, specifically of what language(s) you

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are a ‘legitimate’ native speaker and of which language(s) you are a learner, is forefronted.

In language learning contexts, being a native speaker is more than a mere description of a sociolinguistic fact. Native speakers are closely associated with authenticity (Buendgens-Kosten, 2013), and the presence of native speakers in a community is often highlighted in its advertising.

This paper looks at the functions of ‘being a native-speaker’ vs. ‘being a language-learner’ in a wide variety of language learning platforms (a blogging community, a MOOC, an online forum, a platform for finding tandem partners), focusing on two aspects:

- language status information;
- effect of language status on access to content or functions/affordances.

2. Method

For the purpose of this study, four online language learning services were analysed, three of which were online communities or affinity groups.

Lang-8 (Buendgens-Kosten, 2011) is a language learning blogging community (learners can choose from a broad range of languages offered). Language learners write blog posts in their target language and correct/comment on text written by learners in their native language.

SpanishMOOC is a MOOC teaching beginner Spanish. Learners watch interactive videos in the target language, watch instructional videos in English, and complete language drills and exercises. Learners can also interact with each other and with teachers.

How To Learn Any Language (HTLAL) is an online forum focussing on language learning. Users can discuss language learning and features of specific languages. Furthermore, there are sub forums dedicated to practicing specific languages, such as German or French, where all discussion is performed in the “theme-language” of that sub forum. HTLAL differs from the other communities by being a place where language learning is discussed, rather than primarily a place at which language learning is practiced.

ConversationExchange differs from the other three services discussed as it does not constitute an online community or affinity group. Learners go to

ConversationExchange to find partners for virtual or face-to-face language tandems by posting a short profile and by searching through existing profiles.

The discussion is based on the features these services had in the first half of 2014.

3. Discussion

The discussion will focus on language status information in user profiles and on how language status mediates access to affordances.

3.1. User settings

All four services allow or even require the inclusion of information about language status. Concerning native languages and target languages, they differ in how many languages can be named, if this information is mandatory, and if it is easy to change later on. See [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#) for an overview.

Table 1. Overview of native language status treatment

<i>language learning site</i>	<i>number of native languages</i>	<i>mandatory information?</i>	<i>easy to change?</i>
Lang-8	1	mandatory	yes
SpanishMOOC	1 (from a small selection of options)	mandatory	no
HTLAL	multiple	voluntary	yes
ConversationExchange	multiple	mandatory	yes

Table 2. Overview of target language status treatment

<i>language learning site</i>	<i>number of target languages</i>	<i>mandatory information?</i>	<i>easy to change?</i>
Lang-8	2 (free account), multiple (premium account)	mandatory	yes
SpanishMOOC	Spanish only	NA	NA
HTLAL	multiple	voluntary	yes
ConversationExchange	multiple	mandatory	yes

At Lang-8 and ConversationExchange, language status-related information is part of the user profile, together with information such as country of origin, gender, or a descriptive text. HTLAL includes information about language status in what is called the “language profile” of the user. This information is displayed in an abbreviated form on the left side of each forum post by that user, and with additional information, if provided, on the language profile overview page.

Compared to the other services discussed, HTLAL has much more complex options for indicating language status. The main distinction is in languages a user “speaks” and languages he/she “studies”. Any number of languages can be included in each category. To further specify this information, users can indicate native languages among the language spoken (marked by an asterisk), and add information about language level (e.g. “C2”) to any language spoken or studied.

At SpanishMOOC, information about language status is requested during the early phase of the registration process. Only a very limited number of native languages are provided from which one can choose and the choice cannot be altered afterwards. The reason for this very limited selection will become clear in the next section, which discusses the affordances or functions that depend on language choice.

3.2. Affordances

In all four language learning services surveyed, language status information was, albeit to very different degrees, connected to access to information and functions.

The smallest effect could be observed at HTLA, where access to language profiles of other users was limited to those who had filled out their own language profile. The content of the language profile –what languages users speak, what languages they study– had no effect on access to content or software functions.

This looks quite different in Lang-8, where language settings determine which blog posts one can correct (those in one’s native language) and which blog posts are suggested as reading material (those in one’s native language and in the target languages). In Lang-8, one cannot “like” contributions but can give a “native speaker nod” –as long as one is a native speaker of the language in which the blog post was written. In ConversationExchange, potential tandem partners are not identified based on profile information of the person conducting the search, but based on the search criteria one enters in a search form. If a user accesses a profile the program deems not to be a good fit –because the person whose profile was accessed does not learn one of the user’s native languages– it informs the user about this (“Please note that Pat is not learning your native language”), without limiting access to affordances such as contacting a person.

Within SpanishMOOC, access to software functions is determined by user group, not by language status. Only individuals with a “teacher” role can correct sentences by learners, but being a “teacher” is independent of a user’s language status –being a native speaker does not make one a teacher, nor are teachers necessarily native

speakers. In this MOOC, language status has another effect though. As mentioned above, only few languages can be chosen as native languages when registering for the learning platform (Instreamia) on which SpanishMOOC runs. One's choice of "native language" here influences the user interface language setting and the course material available. If one chooses Spanish as native language, one receives a Spanish user interface, and SpanishMOOC becomes unavailable as course choice. If one chooses English, the user interface is set to English and one can register for SpanishMOOC. Changing between languages requires creating a new account. Information about native language is also included in one's profile and visible to other users.

4. Conclusions

Users play different roles in the different communities, and the design of language status-related user data collected reflects this.

In Lang-8, for example, users are 'correctors' as well as learners, while in ConversationExchange they are tandem-partners. For both functions –to be allotted correction powers by the system and to be found by learners of their language(s)– an overview over the languages users speak is important. On both websites, access to any sub-pages is possible, but the ability to interact with them (e.g. by commenting, by contacting a person) is either controlled (Lang-8), or at least steered (at ConversationExchange). The assumption that a user's language status determines what material is helpful for him/her, and whom he/she can support with their learning is 'hard-coded' in the software.

Assumptions about speaker status itself have also been 'hard-coded' into the design of these language learning services: some see learners as monolingual, others as (potentially) plurilingual. In ConversationExchange –whose makers introduce themselves as "3 Italian polyglots from Venice who traveled the world and are fluent in Venetian, Italian, English, Spanish, PHP, SQL, Javascript" (ConversationExchange, n.d., para 1)– the number of native languages is not limited, while in Lang-8, each user can only be native speaker of one language. HTLAL, in turn, not only permits multiple native languages to be listed, but also allows for inclusion of languages "spoken" rather than "studied" that are non-native languages, and for the provision of additional information, specifically regarding skill level. One person equalling one native language (Lang-8) is contrasted with one person equalling multiple native languages (ConversationExchange) and with one person equalling multiple languages, native and non-native (HTLAL).

In SpanishMOOC, language status is less a statement of one's sociolinguistic background than a choice regarding the user interface language. Here, "native language" is equated with "preferred language".

The four services presented here demonstrate different ways to 'put the native speaker into the product'. Their designs reflect assumptions about what a native speaker is, and about the functions native speakers have in language learning. Each language status-related design decision shapes not only the underlying software structure, but also has an effect on user behaviour, and may impact the learning experience and learning outcomes.

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List of websites discussed

- ConversationExchange: <http://www.conversationexchange.com/index.php?lg=en>
- Lang-8: <http://lang-8.com/>
- How To Learn Any Language: <http://www.how-to-learn-any-language.com/forum/default.asp>
- SpanishMOOC: <http://spanishmooc.com/>