

Advertising Native-Speakerism in the Russian Market of English: A case study

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Abstract. The offline to online turn in education implies a careful evaluation of foreign languages teaching services regarding their reliability and potential to deliver the expected results; however, the lack of studies in the field impede academia to inform the public about unethical, deceitful advertising. Based on multimodal discourse analysis, this paper presents a case study of two texts: an interview with an ‘English-speaking teacher’ in a local news portal used as the door to advertise the BritSpeak language teaching service in the UK. Grounded on the manifestations of native speakerism defined in academia as the ideology claiming the innate superiority of the native speaker to teach his language to foreigners, the results demonstrate that previous knowledge of the Russian market of English preferences and the use of this infamous ideology are the tools employed to compel potential consumers to buy the service. The study of BritSpeak, though hindered by lack of access to the teaching materials, revealed that, always within this ideological framework, the interviewee-advertiser not only denigrates through indexicality the Russian foreign language teaching community and educational system in general but also deceives potential consumers in the quality of advertised teachers. The paper significance resides on its call to decolonize foreign

language teaching by eroding the native speaker myth and with it acknowledge the capabilities of the indigenous teaching community. The paper suggests the study of similar practices regarding services in other European languages and the need to examine the role of local news services in advertising foreign products.

KEYWORDS: native speaker, native speakerism, deceitful advertising, online teaching, market of English, indexicality

Аннотация. Переход от офлайна к онлайн в образовании подразумевает тщательную оценку услуг по обучению иностранным языкам с точки зрения их надежности и потенциала для достижения ожидаемых результатов; однако отсутствие исследований в этой области мешает академическим кругам информировать общественность о неэтичной, обманчивой рекламе. Основываясь на мультимодальном дискурс-анализе, в данной статье представлено исследование двух текстов: интервью с "англоговорящим учителем" на местном новостном портале, использованном в качестве двери для рекламы услуги по обучению языку BritSpeak в Великобритании. Основываясь на проявлениях native speakerism, определяемого в научных кругах как идеология, утверждающая врожденное превосходство носителя языка в обучении иностранцев своему языку, результаты показывают, что предыдущее знание российского рынка предпочтений в английском языке и использование этой пресловутой идеологии являются инструментами, используемыми для принуждения потенциальных потребителей к покупке услуги. Исследование BritSpeak, хотя и затрудненное отсутствием доступа к учебным материалам, показало, что, всегда находясь в этих идеологических рамках, интервьюируемый-рекламодатель не только очерняет через индексальность российское сообщество преподавателей иностранных языков и систему образования в целом, но и обманывает потенциальных потребителей в качестве рекламируемых преподавателей. Значимость статьи заключается в призыве к деколонизации преподавания иностранных языков путем разрушения мифа о

носители языка и признания возможностей коренного преподавательского сообщества. В статье предлагается изучить аналогичную практику в отношении услуг на других европейских языках и необходимость исследовать роль местных новостных служб в рекламе иностранных продуктов.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: носитель языка, спикеризм, обманчивая реклама, онлайн обучение, рынок английского языка, индексальность

1. INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding academic perspectives but subordinated to the dictates of neoliberal globalization, the growing appeal of the English language to the public is its worldwide perception as a commodity –something that can be bought or sold—that opens the doors to the future, a must-have in uncertain times, and a magic solution for better jobs and mobility [1]. As a result, the ensuing demand of English language related services such as teaching, testing, Apps, and editing, among others are on the rise and as such advertised ‘in the age of digital and technology-mediated communication [by] ... deliver[ing] the right message, to the right individual, at the right moment, on the right platform, via the right device, in the right context, [and] at the right scale’ [2]. The accomplishment of the above goal relies on advanced digital data processing to accurately predict potential targets based on their present and personal history. However, despite the ever-mounting evidence and concerns on the ethics of advertising [3, 4, 5, 6], there is a dearth of research in the reliability of language teaching services in reference to their real quality and ethical standards.

The quality standards of an English language service are usually linked to the teachers, type of teaching materials, and expected results advertised; however, when choice is based on the target audience’s beliefs in the superiority of the native speaker (NS) teacher brand, consumers are likely to find themselves in the same situation as when they buy a product not meeting the expected performance. The NS brand in teaching English, an ideological construct called native speakerism, has a long history, thus imprinting the absurd idea that anyone just for the chance of having been born in a specific place is the best individual from whom to learn this language, regardless of

the education level, professional qualifications, experience, and expertise needed, which, as true indicators of quality, are rarely taken into consideration

This paper is aimed at counteracting the racially pernicious ideology of native speakerism in the Russian educational context, and thus contribute to the epistemological decolonization of English language teaching (ELT). To achieve this objective, the paper presents a study that combines an Ekaterinburg News article covertly loaded with this infamous ideology that sets the stage for the advertising of *BritSpeak*, an online language teaching service in the UK, where this ideological construct is used in a more overtly ideological, discriminatory, and deceitful nature to sell this service.

Multidisciplinary in nature, the study combined the use of online tools to briefly explore the role of phrase repetition in the text and sentiment analysis to determine the core message and the emotional tone and attitudes of the original piece of news in Russian ‘Uchit’ yazyk nuzhno u nositelya, a ne prosto u inostrancza’: interv`yu s britanskim prepodavatelem [7] (You need to learn a language from a native speaker, not just a foreigner: an interview with a British teacher] featured on October 1st, 2021 on Novosti Ekaterinburga (Ekaterinburg News) [8] and the online teaching service Britspeak advertised in the news. The use of multimodal critical discourse analysis [9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15] allowed to synthesise the deep meanings native speakerism communicates through pictures, colours, and text in trying to persuade the article target audience to go to the online service and once there, buy it.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Considered by many applied linguists an objective category, the NS notion can be traced back, first, to the standardization and codification of Latin during the Roman empire and subsequent claims of power on the part of the rulers and, second, as to the principle of correctness attached to classical texts [16]. The first academic use of the term in English is found in linguistic structuralism and retaken in generative linguistics in the form of an idealized individual living in a homogeneous speech-community who can speak/listen to a language perfectly and to whom irrelevant factors such as noise

or memory have no effects in his grammar, thus his usefulness for the production of formal models of competence to adequately explain mental grammar during performance [17].

When this view of the native speaker concept becomes a ‘flesh and bone’ [18, p. 16] human being in ELT, the conditions to cross the boundaries of Linguistics are created, and thus the conception of the NS as the ideal teacher of English is born. This move allows to project an innate superiority of native speaker teachers in terms of language command and cultural insights which the non-native speaker (NNS) teacher lacks. This social construct is called native-speakerism in ELT and may be traced back to the western colonial educational practices of divide and rule through the process of submission by acculturation. This ideology, understood as a system of beliefs, privileges any NS over the non-native speaker (NNS) teacher and is the basis upon which rests the ELT edu-business of *native speakerism* [19].

Native speakerism is part of the colonial sedimentations within the educational thought of neoliberal globalization. Research output contesting the NS hegemony over the NNS, and thus native speakerism [19, 20, 21] identify a monolingual and monocultural approach to ELT underscoring the normative, universal and inherently superior character of Angle-Saxon, Eurocentric education and technology. Other findings [22, 23, 24] include a generalized perception in the superiority of the native speaker teachers and the association of their English Western varieties, namely British and American, with the only correct language models regardless of the many existing World Englishes as a result of colonial expansion. Furthermore, Lowe [21, p. 17] contends that though ‘native speakerism [is] in retreat’, like systemic racism, the overt expressions of this ideology have gone underground to manifest themselves, for instance, in different hiring practices in ELT positions as well as the imposition of western generated approaches to teaching and testing. Native speakerism is, thus, like any other of the perennial colonial holds on the subaltern Other. That is, in the world of ELT, the worth of the English NS is realised according to ‘the double fetish perceptions of the worth of the speaker [first] as a member of a community or

[predetermined] national polity and [second] as the most *qualified* to speak by having become *credentialed* [by birth] in the normative form' [24, p. 13, italics added].

3. STUDY AND RESULTS

Though Ekaterinburg News often features articles related to education, this piece of news is relevant because of the context in which it is published. First, the significant reduction of offline private ELT tutoring as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic has paved the way for online lessons. For instance, the city portals *Vash repetitor* (Your private tutor) [24] and *Luchshie repetitory* (the best tutors) [25] serve as websites where many of the 2294 and 42085 ELT teachers respectively advertise online availability to work at prices usually affordable to the middle-class sector and above. Some of them, especially on the second website, are foreigners that announce themselves as native speakers who usually just declare years of work in the field. Second, photographs and declared qualifications allow to estimate that the Russian teachers are between their late twenties to their early sixties and have enough experience as well as credentialed academic background to offer a diverse variety of individualized or group lessons tailored to the students' needs. Finally, the economic depression and ensuing inflation following the pandemic allow to assume that the demand for private tutoring of English has significantly declined. This final assumption implies that competition from abroad is likely to deprive fellow professionals of economic income to live or simply supplement their public sector meagre salaries in dire times.

According to Endole [26], the Britspeak website [27] belongs to Britspeak Ltd (Reg. No. 12667989), a private limited company with shared capital running since Oct.12, 2020, not thirty years ago as the website claims, with two active directors, one of whom is Stephen Paul Tatum (the interviewee). This company, registered at 6 Croxdale Terrace, Greenside, Ryton, NE40 4RZ (Greenside, Northwest England) is classified as an institution offering educational support. No website, telephone, or email is reported except for a Russian office in Tyumen with a contact number. According to his VK profile, the interviewee is [a] sales/market expert who seems to have become an English teacher in Russia.

The lack of the interviewer's name led to the assumption that the *You need to learn a language from a native speaker, not just a foreigner: an interview with a British teacher* article was a paid service, not an actual interview, where the interviewee provided the questions, the answers, and his photograph. This first photograph anchors the text. The next two photos show London landmarks, and the fourth, a young woman making a thumb-ups signal.

In addition to the photos, the quantitative analysis of this 733-word interview reveals very useful information. The online text analyser tool from Online-Utility [28] shows that, in just forty-six sentences, the word *native* followed by *speaker from* is repeated five times or nearby the word *teacher* as in 'a real native speaker, and several times for whom the language is native.' Other revealing phrases in the text: *great opportunity to* and *knowledge of* work in connection with *native speaker, teacher*, and *UK* by repetition to reinforce the main idea of the text; that is, the article is promoting a teaching platform the interviewee developed, an idea confirmed with the sentiment analysis results obtained online Free Sentimental Analysis platform [29] which reveals the interviewee wants to spiritually connect with Russians to sell his product. In other words, the core message revolves around a user-friendly platform to an already known market target audience: consumers in Himmash, an Ekaterinburg district, and Uralians in general.

The language similarities between the piece of news featuring an interview with a NS teacher and the BritSpeak website as acts of communication have led to the conclusion that the same person, Stephen Tatum, is the author of the written BritSpeak text (heretofore, the interviewee/advertiser).

As an act of communication, the BritSpeak webpage also combines, in addition to a careful use of colours and pictures such as a double-decker, written text which leads the potential customer is led to examine his inner mental constructions about success in learning English with Russian-speaking teachers and the possibility of studying with the ideal ELT teacher, a NS. The three questions below are based on an appeal to rationality through the Logos to rationally involve the Pathos in the process of seeking common ground through shared beliefs, 'Would you ask an accountant to

fix your car? Would you ask a chef to fly a plane? Then why would you study English with non-natives of the language?’ This overt display of native speakerism is followed by summon-like language as appeals to the Pathos awareness of the opportunity and time to start using the service and, of course, pay: ‘What are you waiting for?! Get moving on YOUR (sic) journey of growth with BritSpeak, with true natives of English as your expert guides!’

Other data obtained from BritSpeak, besides confirming the ideological nature of its claims, reveal the requirements to work as a teacher with the company. The section *Jobs* reads:

You don't need a degree or a teaching qualification. Unlike the plethora of online schools out there, we don't think that a random bachelor's degree really affects your ability to speak and communicate your native language to foreign students. We work with an excellent TEFL certification provider and can help you gain a qualification that will serve you for the rest of your career. BritSpeak is a learning platform designed and run by experienced native EFL teachers, so we know what is needed to teach the language. We're also aware of how badly overseas schools, whether online or not, treat their greatest assets – Native Speaking Teachers!! Hence our no-nonsense approach. (Italics added)

After which, the job requirements are listed: ‘true native of the language, GCSE/high school diploma: English language grade a – c; ability to objectively converse on a number of topics, ability to explain grammatical rules, and commitment’ followed by promises based on job fulfilment.

4. DISCUSSION

Though competition is a natural feature of capitalist economies, the published “interview” and the BritSpeak platform are unethically based on knowledge of the public preferences and makes use of powerful ideological myths to seduce the gullible, as both the article and BritSpeak do with the Russian public market of English with its keen interest on native speaker teachers.

In the *Ekaterinburg News* interview, the interviewee’s image, enhanced by a background of both banks of the Thames and the London City Hall on the right,