

**COVID SURGES IN UK**



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People still ask me: *what is your native language?* Another variant is *how any/which languages do you speak?*, and the closely related *where are you from?* question. Linguists know that *native language* does not always equate to the language you are most proficient in, or the language you dream in, or the language in which you silently swear at the driver who just cut you off.

*Native language* is for many not even one single language in the first place. Ask me what I am talking about and then I will tell you the language I'd rather say it in. But it can be even more fine-grained than that. Romantic love may be more naturally expressed in one language, parental love in another.

And then there is the issue of defining "native speakers". As we get older, it becomes more difficult to *sound* (in a particular language) the same way as people who've been speaking it all their lives. Linguists believe that these difficulties begin to show up roughly around puberty, but no-one knows exactly



**'Native' speech**

**Language Matters**

when (it varies across individuals) or why (it is linked to brain plasticity, but the jury is still out on the details).

Despite problems with the idea of a *native speaker*, researchers make constant use of it. Many studies erroneously assume that analysing language of native monolingual speakers is more objective in some sense. This is because multilingual speakers are deemed to bring with them several complications.

They may introduce possible interference from their additional languages (*Is this a feature of language X or something brought in from language Y*

*that this speaker also knows?*). Or they may suffer from proficiency concerns (*How native is native enough?*).

Yet, the fact that native speakers are held in such high esteem has had the unintended consequence of excluding bilingual/multilingual speakers from certain strands of language research. Moreover, multilingual speakers are often interrogated about their language knowledge in ways that question their identity and sense of belonging to the language communities they affiliate with (*Is Māori your mother tongue?*).

This line of interrogation is harmful, especially to indigenous, minority and migrant communities, because it implicitly attaches prestige to an "ideal"

and authoritative speaker, who is exclusively proficient in one language. Taken to its full course, the questioning and resulting exclusions can leave many people feeling altogether "languageless".

To add to this, conversely, is the guilt that comes for some people when they lose ability or proficiency in the language they first learnt. Or when they are expected to be able to speak a language they do not.

Last month, a team of linguists from Michigan published a bold paper problematising the idea of a native speaker. The real question is what to do about it. The authors propose that we avoid relying on idealised (and let's face it, largely untenable) native speakers by building speaker profiles instead of binary speaker categories (native, non-native) and by calling for the inclusion of *all* speakers in studies, regardless of their profiles. This will, of course, complicate how language generalisations are made. However, speakers will become more visible and their language use will more accurately reflect reality.

After all, multilingual speakers are not multiple native speakers trapped inside one body, they are people with diverse histories, linguistic abilities and knowledge, whose relationship with the languages they speak is wildly complex.

So, if you are a bit like me, always a little stumped by the native speaker question, maybe you can take comfort in being able to articulate your difficulties in several languages, none of which you may be a "native" speaker of.

**Contact us**

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**Heat dome shows action needed now**

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

Recent shockingly high temperatures in the northwestern US and Canada were – and are – very frightening. Heat and the fires it caused killed hundreds of people. Daily temperature records were smashed by more than 5 degrees Celsius in some places. In Lytton, British Columbia, the heat reached 49.6C. The wildfires that consumed the town produced their own thunderstorms, alongside thousands of lightning strikes.

An initial study shows human activity made this heat dome – in which a ridge of high pressure acts as a lid preventing warm air from escaping – at least 150 times more likely.

**Viewpoint**

The World Weather Attribution Group of scientists, who use computer climate models to assess global heating trends and extreme weather, have warned that last week exceeded even their worst-case scenarios.

If there is anything positive to be taken from this new information it can only be that it intensifies the pressure on policymakers to act.

Environmentalists used to shake their heads when highly unusual weather was reported in terms that ignored climate change's contribution. Now, thanks to attribution science, the link is firmly made. To avoid future heat domes, countries must stop pumping so much energy into the climate system.