

# THE M.I.Q. MARATHON



# The problem with 'native speaker' label



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A common discussion when it comes to language(s) involves the question, “Who is a native speaker of X language?” In circles involving language teaching, language policy, and the like, this is sometimes followed by the question, “What does it *mean* to be a native speaker of X language, and what does this entail?”

This was the topic of Andreea Calude’s recent *Language Matters* column. The present column asks the provocative question, “Why should it *matter* if someone is a native speaker or not, and where does this concept come from?”

The problem with classifying someone as a “native speaker” is that it is part of a false dichotomy, meaning people are presented with only two options (“native speaker” or “non-native speaker”), and these are incorrectly presented as being at odds with each other. This is a gross oversimplification of speakers’ abilities and



## Language Matters

experiences, and ignores the fact that “non-native speakers” often have considerable influence on the development of language. The reality is much more complex than this flawed contrast makes it seem.

Why is it problematic to contrast “native speakers” with “non-native speakers”? One reason is that there is an underlying assumption that a “native speaker” has greater linguistic knowledge and ability. This is just not so. Often, those who learn an additional language have greater mastery of grammatical rules and composition than do those who grow up speaking the language.

Furthermore, the distinction is often

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used for gatekeeping purposes, whereby the former is automatically preferred over the latter due to the above assumption. This is especially true when it comes to language teaching.

There is a bias (often unconscious) in favour of “native speakers”, as if they were magically born to be better teachers of the language, which is simply not true. The better teacher will always be the one more well-versed in what they teach, who supports their students, and who works hard to continually educate themselves in their field, regardless of when they learned the language(s) they teach.

If the assumptions about “native speakers” are incorrect and harmful, from where did they originate? Second language acquisition researchers Jean-Marc Dewaele, Thomas Bak, and Lourdes

Ortega examined this question in 2020. As they explain, history records the contrasting ideas of “native speaker” v “non-native speaker” as first appearing in 1858 in New York as part of a campaign against immigrants to the United States.

The rhetoric used called upon a racist ideology that pitted the “native Anglo-Saxons” against all people with non-Anglo-European heritage. This harmful division then became part of British and American coloniser rhetoric, further pushing a “divide and conquer” strategy.

Today, the act of contrasting “native speakers” with “non-native speakers” has continued to be supported by language purists, tying nation and race to language. It is almost always the students of minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds who are labelled as “non-native” speakers in school, regardless of their linguistic abilities, which further contributes to a lack of equity in education.

In an era where we recognise the frequency and importance of international movement and co-operation, it is necessary to acknowledge that people’s linguistic abilities shift throughout their lives. Therefore, instead of focusing on difference in the form of a false dichotomy, we instead need to look to the benefits of complex and dynamic language abilities and experience.

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## THE IRISH TIMES

# No relief yet for Lebanon’s agonies

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

A year ago a devastating explosion of a stock of ammonium nitrate fertiliser haphazardly stored at Beirut’s port killed more than 200 and left much of it looking like a war zone. The blast, for which no-one has been held accountable, and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, dealt terrible coups de grace to an economy already sinking into what the World Bank describes as the third most severe economic crisis globally since the mid-19th century.

Lebanon’s per capita GDP has plummeted by 40 per cent, pushing nearly half the population below the poverty line and into unemployment.

At the root of the crisis is the collapsing, once

## Viewpoint

admired, banking system. Together with Lebanon’s central bank, commercial banks engaged in what was in effect a Ponzi scheme that dug an US\$80 billion public debt hole in the country’s finances. Eight families control 29 per cent of the banking sector’s assets, led by the family of former prime minister Saad Hariri. The recent appointment of billionaire ex-premier Najib Mikati as Lebanon’s new prime minister-designate is hardly reassuring. Despite international pressure for far-reaching reform, Mikati is very much part of what the World Bank calls “elite capture” and “the political consensus in defence of a bankrupt economic system, which benefited a few for so long”.