

Viewpoint

Viewpoint represents an individual opinion and is not authorized as an official position by the association leadership.

Proud to be a Nonnative English Speaker

by Paul Kei Matsuda

A few years ago, at one of the TESOL leadership meetings, someone from another caucus asked me which caucus I represented. "NNEST," I replied, "which stands for Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL." With an expression of sympathy on her face, she responded, "What an unfortunate name." The conversation came to an abrupt conclusion as the voice from the podium demanded our attention, but I knew it would have ended even if the meeting had not begun. I just did not know what to say.

I have been keenly aware for quite some time that the name of our caucus has been a topic of debate. It was being contested when the NNEST caucus was first established, and even after its inception, a speaker at one of the TESOL sessions argued strenuously against the use of the term *nonnative English speaker*. I can see how some people might consider the term to be an unfortunate choice because, as the argument goes, it defines a group of people for what they are not. But at the same time, I am troubled by the assumption people are implicitly accepting when they respond negatively to the term *nonnative*—the assumption that the term *native* is somehow a positive one.

Few people would admit that they embrace such an assumption. But I doubt that those who find the term *nonnative* unfortunate would react

in the same way to terms such as *nondairy products*, *nonalcoholic beverages*, or even *nontoxic chemicals*. It cannot be the combination of the prefix *non-* with a human referent that bothers them, either, especially if you consider examples such as *nontraditional students*, *nonsmokers*, *noncriminals*, and *nonfascists*.

It is not really the *non-* part that people find unfortunate. For *nonnative* to be a pejorative term, its counterpart would have to be positive. *Nonnative* is unfortunate because *native* is supposed to be fortunate. *Nonnative* is marked, whereas *native* is unmarked. *Nonnative* is marginal, and *native* is dominant. *Nonnative* is negative, and *native* is positive.

If anything needs to be changed, I do not think it is the term *nonnative*. Rather, the assumption that *native* is somehow more positive than *nonnative* needs to be challenged. In fact, I keep coming back to the term *nonnative English speaker* precisely because it helps expose the very issue that the NNEST caucus has been trying to address.

Last fall, I received an e-mail query from a graduate student working on a master's thesis with a focus on NNEST issues. She contacted me because she had found out on the Internet that I was the current NNEST caucus chair. In her message, however, she mentioned that her adviser did not think I was a nonnative speaker.

I had no idea where her adviser got that impression, but my reaction was mixed. On

the one hand, I was glad she did not assume that I was a nonnative speaker just because I was active in the NNEST caucus. On the other hand, I was somewhat disappointed that she did not think so, and I kept wondering why. Was it because of my name? Was it because of my writing? Had she been to my presentations? Was it because I had a tenure-track job in the United States? Or was it because I held a leadership position?

Whatever the reason, I could not help but think that it was based on the pervasive assumption that *native* is positive and *nonnative*, nonpositive. I wanted to believe otherwise—that it was not because she thought I was "too good to be a nonnative English speaker." But the other possibility—that she thought so because I was "not good enough to be a nonnative speaker"—seemed almost unimaginable, if not equally inappropriate.

To be honest, I was somewhat surprised by my own reaction. Five years ago, I would not have minded the comment at all; 10 years ago, I would have even found it flattering. The difference, of course, is that I became involved in the NNEST caucus, where I met so many great NNESTs. Rather than hiding my background as a nonnative English speaker, I learned to foreground it as an important part of my professional identity. As I worked with outstanding nonnative-English-speaking professionals, I began to see the possibility of changing the dominant assumption by collec-

tively establishing the pattern of excellence (Matsuda, 2001). Through my interactions with other NNESTs, I learned that I could also give courage to other NNESTs—just as my predecessors did to me.

These are some of the reasons that I am not willing to give up the term *nonnative English speakers*. It does not mean I am oblivious to the problem of the native/nonnative binary—I realize that such a dichotomy is ultimately untenable. And I cannot emphasize enough that the language background is only one of many factors that define who we are as professionals. However, I do believe that the term *NNEST* still has an important role to play in the profession.

One day, I hope the positive-native/negative-nonnative binary will become a nonissue. But until that day, I shall continue to identify myself as a proud nonnative-English-speaking professional.

Reference

Matsuda, P. K. (2001). My credo as an NNEST professional. *NNEST Newsletter*, 3(1), 4.

Paul Kei Matsuda (pmatsuda@unh.edu) is assistant professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, in the United States. He has served as the chair of the Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL caucus. For information about the NNEST caucus, see <http://nnest.moussu.net>.