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## Thoughts on High Level Proficiency in Arabic, Russian and English with a Platitudinous Postlude

*James Bernhardt*

In the present paper, I look at the top of the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Skill Level Descriptions and critique several of their assumptions. As I do this, I speak for myself and not for the Government in general or the U.S. Department of State in particular. I also do not pretend that my conclusions are not uncontroversial. I also discuss the 2012 ACTFL proficiency standards, but note that we do not train to those standards at the Foreign Service Institute.

September 11, 2001 focused the energies of the Foreign Service Institute's (FSI) Arabic language training section on the highest levels of the proficiency scale. After the 2001 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, one of the most pressing questions at the Foreign Service Institute was whether we could train people to appear on Arabic-language media effectively. Could we train our students to a level where they could appear on Al-Jazeera's equivalent of "Firing Line" and articulate our nation's values and foreign policy to audiences that were predisposed to dislike the message? Could we train people to successfully handle media appearances especially when confronted by hostile reporters?

We quickly understood that the optimal long-term fix for our language problem would include giving some Foreign Service Officers more than the full two-year course in Arabic. We also came to understand that our interpretations of requirements set out in the ILR table's Skill Level Descriptions did not fully meet or reflect the demands put on our students. We knew that we needed to develop a new way to understand the requirements of high-level proficiency.

The tasks of training students to become highly articulate speakers who could appear in the media required us to focus our attention on the audience rather than on any linguistic features of the language. To speak on the record meant that form, structure, and word choice would have to be correct. To speak on sensitive topics required

that our students be able to articulate U.S. foreign policy positions in a way that, while not what the audience wanted to hear, would help the audience understand the position. Training our students to speak to a broad audience was perhaps the most difficult task. What would be acceptable to the university professors in Damascus may sound pretentious to the shop keepers of Cairo or Casablanca. Our work at the top of the proficiency scale suggested that we might need to reinterpret some aspects of the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) skill-level descriptions.

A short history of the proficiency movement and its standards at the State Department is in order. In the late 1950s Congress directed the Department to develop a language test for its employees. It also directed the Secretary of State to establish a language requirement for each position in its embassies around the world. The Foreign Service Act of 1959 established the prime directive for language training at State, "The Secretary shall designate every Foreign Service officer position in a foreign country whose incumbent should have a useful knowledge of a language or dialect common to such country."

In many ways, the term "useful knowledge" sets FSI training apart from other forms of language education. FSI trains its students, who are well educated when they enter the Foreign Service, to use foreign languages on the job. While all aspects of a liberal arts education at university are important to development of our students, some aspects of foreign language programs at America's universities are beyond the scope of FSI language training, which is focused on getting people ready to work.

Since every student coming to FSI for language training has a specific job assignment, at FSI we can focus training on the specific tasks we know individuals will have to perform on the job. There are advantages and disadvantages to FSI's type of language training.

In the early years of proficiency training at the State department, graduates were assessed according to a heuristic, rather than explicit standard. In the early 1960s, FSI testers knew success when they saw it. In the mid 1960s, FSI, working with other government agencies in an informal, unfunded group called the Interagency Language Roundtable, created the first set of standards. After another twenty years, the government testing community came to feel that those standards were

too vague. In the early 1980s, a small ILR working group wrote the standards that we know today as the ILR Skill Level Descriptions.

The current skill level descriptions establish the “Highly Articulate, Well Educated Native Speaker” as the standard against which the performance of language learners is to be measured. The ILR also noted, “Unless otherwise specified, the term ‘native speaker’ refers to native speakers of a standard dialect.”

Reading the ILR standards some 30 years after they were written, especially in light of current training requirements, we see that there are few terms that are not controversial. I will discuss the issues of standard language first, then turn to the question of native speakers. The definition of “well educated,” according to the ILR, refers to a person who has graduated from a college or university and can speak the standard dialect. “Highly articulate” is not defined. We conclude our studies by examining samples of speech at the highest levels of proficiency and finish with a platitudinous postlude.

The concept of standard language has been with us for several centuries. English, with its many homelands and regional variations, may be more challenged than most languages when we are pressed to define or describe its standard form or forms. Should we be speaking the Queen’s English? BBC English? Should we try to sound like Walter Cronkite or Peter Jennings? Should we in America give up all hope, believing that Professor Henry Higgins was right when he said “There even are places where English completely disappears. In America, they haven’t used it for years!”

Is it even possible to argue for a Standard English when British English, South Asian English, Australian English and American English differ in their own ways? Braj B. Kachru, Centre for Advanced study Professor of Linguistics and Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Emeritus, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, puts the issue in its simplest terms, “Whose language is English, anyway?” (Kachru 2005, 11)

Russians call their standard language “literary” or *литературный русский язык*. Literary Russian is the goal of most Russian as a foreign language programs. It is the object of study in a multitude of grammar books and linguistic studies.

Michael Lomonosov in ПРЕДИСЛОВИЕ О ПОЛЬЗЕ КНИГ ЦЕРКОВНЫХ В РОССИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ (Preface on the Use of Church Books in the Russian Language, 1757) identified three registers or styles for literary Russian: low, middle and high. Anton Barsov allows for a church variant in the pronunciation of standard Russian in his *Российская грамматика* (Russian Grammar) of 1830. Even from the earliest descriptions of Russian, literary Russian was not a single concept.

Contemporary Literary Russian seems to be fairly standard from the Baltic to the Pacific. Non-literary Russian is becoming ever more available to students of the language using social media. The omnipresent pro form *че/чо/чѐ* exemplifies of the kind of language that can befuddle earnest students striking out on their own into the world of social media and blogs.

In the 21st Century, the question of variants of Russian has become quite interesting and, sometimes, controversial. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian found itself to be an official language in the several countries that made up the USSR. The migration for Russian speakers at that time brought large numbers of speakers of Russian to many other countries, including the United States. Perhaps Russian is in the process of becoming a language of many homes, like Spanish and English. In comments published on February 21, 2014 on [ru.delfi.lt](http://ru.delfi.lt), Maksim Krongauz, the head of the Russian State University for the Humanities, commented:

Это проблема чисто лингвистическая и решается без политических амбиций. Но если все-таки вариант существует, то возникает следующий вопрос — имеет ли он право на собственную кодификацию, на собственный стандарт? И, конечно, этот вопрос должен решаться сообща русскоговорящими в разных странах. Насколько нам нужен разный стандарт? Если же мы говорим о русском языке, то вряд ли можем говорить о швейцарской русской литературе, потому что там живет известный русский писатель Шишкин, или об эстонской, потому что писатель Иванов получил очередную премию. То есть мы с вами заинтересованы в едином стандарте и едином пространстве русского языка или мы созрели для чего-то нового?

[This is a purely linguistic problem which can be solved without political agendas. But if variations of Russian actually exist, then we must turn to the next question - whether they have the right to own codification, on their own standards? And, of course, this issue must be resolved by the Russian-speaking in different countries working together. How much do we need different standards? If we are talking about the Russian language, it is unlikely that we would talk about Swiss Russian literature, just because the well-known Russian writer Shishkin lives there, or about Estonian Russian, because the writer Ivanov received another award. That is, are we interested in a uniform standard and a single space of Russian language, or we are ripe for something new?]

Many heritage speakers of Russian in our classrooms would be especially pleased to hear that a Russian Professor recognizes an American variant of the Russian language. Giving status to their use of *кушать* and *брать класс* among other things, affirms them in their self-identity and their ability to speak the language they actually use at home and with their friends.

For Arabic, the question of which type(s) of language are considered standard is especially difficult. The *Ethnologue*, published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, lists 36 languages under the heading of Arabic. While Standard Arabic is cited as the official language of Saudi Arabia, the *Ethnologue* notes that Standard Arabic is not a first language for anyone. "In most Arab countries only the well-educated have adequate proficiency in Standard Arabic, while over 100,500,000 do not" (*Ethnologue* 2014). Standard Arabic, a term which can include Classical Arabic, Koranic Arabic, Fusha, and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), is used in education, and for official purposes as well as in written materials. Formal speeches are often made in standard Arabic, but not always. It is not uncommon for speakers to begin in standard Arabic and switch to the vernacular, or to code switch between the two. The Fusha holds a special place in Arab societies because it has roots in the Koran and plays a central role in religion and ceremonial functions.

Yasir Suleiman, Professor of Modern Arabic Studies at the University of Cambridge, argues that Standard Arabic, the Fusha, is

everybody's native language. According to Suleiman, everybody also has a "mother tongue," which is a dialect of Arabic and which can be called the vernacular, *amiyya* (in Egypt), *khaliji* (in the Gulf), or *dereja* (in Morocco), among other things (Suleiman 2011). Several of the dialects of Arabic are mutually incomprehensible with other dialects of Arabic.

In many languages, a discussion about the differences between standard language and other forms of the language is actually a discussion of register. For some in the second language testing community, high-level proficiency implies high-level language, which is, in turn, high-register language. According to Suleiman, making the distinctions in this way for Arabic is misleading, "because it wrongly generalizes diglossia into a universal feature by associating it analogously with register distinctions in language" (Suleiman 2004). In vernacular Arabic it is possible to speak at all registers. Many of the defenders of the privileged position of Fusha state their cases using the vernacular.

Most Arabic as a Foreign Language programs in the United States teach MSA since it is widely believed that MSA serves as the foundation for all of the dialects of Arabic. Teachers tend to believe that students who have a strong foundation in MSA will be able to localize their language to the dialect they need once they arrive in country. The most popular Arabic language textbook, *Al Kitāb*, focuses on MSA, but has introduced expanded use of dialect with its fifth edition.

Which type of Arabic a student may want to study or which type of Arabic a program should focus on depends on the objectives and goals of the student or program. A program preparing students to be tomorrow's scholars and professors may well want to work with MSA and use dialect only in as much as it will help students navigate study abroad experiences. Programs training professionals to work in the Arabic speaking world might focus on the vernacular and train students to mix MSA with it appropriately. In the professional world the question "What language will your customers speak?" may hold the answer to the MSA vs vernacular Arabic question.

For those programs using proficiency tests, how are the many forms of Arabic going to be assessed? Can you get a good score on a proficiency test if you speak in the vernacular? Can you get a high score

on a proficiency test if you use only MSA and fail to demonstrate abilities in at least one dialect?

An important consideration for all of our programs has to be the expectations of our students. Many students of Arabic find that they are not able to understand what people are saying when they are holding general conversations even though most people can understand their performance in standard language. Even when our students are able to say what they want to say, they are often discouraged when Arabs may react negatively or even laugh when our students use MSA rather than vernacular Arabic.

When the ILR skill level description calls for us to focus on the performance of “native speakers of a standard dialect,” they may be giving us a nearly impossible task. We have seen that the term “standard dialect” raises a multitude of questions and objections. When a language is as widely spoken as Russian, where widely agreed upon standards exist, studying literary Russian, with some time spent with conversational Russian may make sense. Studying MSA might not be the best answer for all students of Arabic. While MSA is a standard language, it is not the home language for anyone. Many standards exist for English, but picking which ones to use may present challenges.

Let us turn to the question of the “native speaker.” Who is she? If we are to measure learner performance against that of the Native speaker, we should be able to identify who she is and how she speaks.

In a keynote address for the James E. Alatis Plenary Session at the 2014 TESOL Conference in Portland, David Graddol said that in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century we were in a much more certain world, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century he doubts “we could really get away with using the term ‘native speaker’ or the category Native Speaker of a language in the same unproblematic way we used to.” He also notes that with the rapid growth of English around the world, and with all of the various types of English used around the world, the distinctions among native speakers, second language speakers and speakers of English as a Foreign Language have become less useful.

As I worked on this paper, I began to wonder about the origins of the use of the term “Native Speaker” in the ILR skill level descriptions. I turned to H. David Argoff, erstwhile Associate Dean for Washington

Instruction at the Foreign Service Institute and one of the people involved in the reconceptualization of the skill-level descriptions in the mid-1980s. I asked him if the term “native speaker” referred to Noam Chomsky’s “Ideal Native Speaker,” which I understood to be a person who could create an infinite number of grammatically correct sentences. Argoff suggested that in order to get a feeling for what the government language community was talking about in the 1980s, I read Thomas M. Paikeday’s (2003) *The Native Speaker is Dead*.

Paikeday’s book, first published in 1985, presents a conversation among some thirty-three linguists, psychologists, philosophers, and lexicographers. The participants respond to a series of questions about concept of the “native speaker” and his/her role or importance for linguists, etc. Even in 1985, there was little agreement about the term “native speaker.” Who can be considered a native speaker? Who not?

Paikeday’s group seemed to agree that a native speaker is valuable to linguists because he/she is a good judge of grammaticality. The Native Speaker could rule on whether a grammatical construction was correct or not. Paikeday’s linguists, however, struggled to agree on who could be called a Native Speaker. Edward Gates from the Department of English at Indiana State University suggested, “Native speaker is one who speaks a language as his/her mother tongue” (Paikeday, 15). The moderator points out that the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, published in 1978, does not do justice to the term Native Speakers when it defines them as “Those who learn English as the first language.” William T. McLeod, Managing Editor, Wm Collins Sons & Co., Glasgow, argues, “I think the [Collins] definition is accurate. A native speaker of a language in the usual and general sense in which that term is used denotes someone who has learned the language from his earliest days by virtue of having been born in the country in which it is spoken” (Paikeday, 16). And Edward Gates responds, that while he concurs with McLeod’s definition, “if one starts probing its boundaries, one finds them fuzzy” (Paikeday, 16). For the rest of the book the linguists probe the boundaries of the term Native Speaker, and find them fuzzy nearly to the point of being impossible to use.

Is having been born into the language community enough? Is your native language the same as your mother tongue? Could a person

who is bilingual be considered a native speaker, when we know that word usage and sentence structures can be affected by the words and structures of other language? And finally, once again, who gets to decide which usages and which dialects of a language are standard?

So, if the term “Native Speaker” is as suspect as “Standard Dialect,” will we have any more luck with “well educated”?

We have seen that the elements of the yardstick created by the ILR for measuring performance are problematic at best. Our analysis would suggest that is high time to abandon the ILR Skill Level Descriptions and move on to something better. But with students who need to prepare for their jobs and with thousands of tests to perform each year, dropping the descriptions is not practical. So perhaps if we look at the actual speech acts of particular individuals who most of us can agree perform at the highest proficiency levels, we can learn something.

We begin looking at high-level speech by considering a sentence from the first paragraph of Joseph Brodsky’s 1987 Nobel Lecture. Brodsky said,

Для человека частного и частность эту всю жизнь какой-либо общественной роли предпочитавшего, для человека, зашедшего в предпочтении этом довольно далеко — и в частности от Родины, ибо лучше быть последним неудачником в демократии, чем мучеником или властителем дум в деспотии, — оказаться внезапно на этой трибуне — большая неловкость и испытание.

[For someone rather private, for someone who all his life has preferred his private condition to any role of social significance, and who went in this preference rather far - far from his motherland to say the least, for it is better to be a total failure in democracy than a martyr or the crème de la crème in tyranny - for such a person to find himself all of a sudden on this rostrum is a somewhat uncomfortable and trying experience.]

Brodsky’s text has many of the hallmarks of high-level, difficult speech. The sentence is long. Brodsky puts words in a non-English word order, *для человека частного* rather than *для частного человека*. Brodsky uses a verbal adjective *предпочитавшего* separated from the

word it refers to by ten words. He uses the same word three times, with each having a slightly different meaning or function: частность, частного, в частности. He uses a low frequency conjunction ибо лишь. And finally, the simplest collocation turns out to be one of the most difficult components of the passage: эту всю. The problem is that эту refers to частность, which come before it, and всю refers to жизнь, which comes after it. My students have a devil of a time overriding their internal English grammars, which are driving them to read the collocation as “this whole.”

A key skill that marks one as having high level proficiency is the ability to adapt one’s speech to the audience. Facing a hostile audience is particularly challenging. When the audience agrees with you and when they like you, it is easy to focus on the form, structure and rhetoric style. When the audience is hostile, when they do not like you or like what you have to say, carefully crafting speech becomes a much more difficult task. When they are shouting you down, it can be nearly impossible to stay focused on form.

Nobel Prize winning physicist Andrey Sakharov faced a very hostile audience when he addressed the First Congress of Deputies in May and June of 1989. In the YouTube video clip, we see Sakharov take the podium, begin his speech, and begin to draw mixed reactions from his audience starting with his very first words (the reader who takes the time to look at the YouTube.com video will have a fuller impression of this amazing event). Sakharov chooses short sentences. He repeats key words several times. When the auditorium is vociferous, Sakharov’s speech becomes less well planned. Under intense pressure, Sakharov’s sentences become shorter and are often reduced to phrases. His grammatical structure also seems to deteriorate. He starts some phrases or sentences, backs out, and rephrases. At one point he seems to change course mid-collocation.

Я меньше всего желал оскорбить советскую армию, я глубоко уважаю советскую армию, советского солдата, который защитил нашу родину в великой отечественной войне, но когда речь идет об афганской войне, то я, опять же, не оскорбляю того солдата, который проливал там кровь и героически выполнял свой приказ, не об этом идет речь, речь

идет о том, что сама война в Афганистане была преступной, преступной авантюрой предпринятой (аплодисменты), предпринятой неизвестно кем по неизвестно... неизвестно кто несет ответственность за это огромное преступление нашей родины, и это преступление стоило жизни почти миллиону афганцев, против которых... Против целого народа велась война на уничтожение, миллион человек погиб ... и это ... и это то, что на нас лежит страшным ... страшным грехом, страшным упреком. Мы должны смыть с себя именно этот позор, этот страшный позор, который лежит на нашем руководстве вопреки народу, вопреки армии, совершило это ... э ... этот акт агрессии. Так вот что я хотел... Я выступал против введения советских войск в Афганистане и за это был сослан в Горький. Именно это послужило главной причиной, и я горжусь этим. Я горжусь этой ссылкой в Горький, как наградой, которую я получил. Это первое, что я хотел сказать.

[The last thing I want to do is to offend the Soviet army, I have great respect for the Soviet army, the Soviet soldier who defended our country in World War II. But when it comes to the Afghan War, I, again, do not want to offend that soldier who shed blood and heroically carried out his orders. That is not what I am talking about. The war in Afghanistan was a crime. A criminal adventure undertaken (applause), undertaken by someone unknown due to unknown... no one knows who is responsible for our country's great crime, and this crime cost the lives of almost a million Afghans. Against which, the war of extermination was carried out against the entire nation. A million people died ... and this ... and for this we bare a terrible sin, a terrible reproach. We need to wash away this shame, this terrible shame that rests upon our leadership who committed a sin against the people, in spite of the army, ... uh ... this act of aggression. What I wanted ... I opposed the introduction of Soviet troops in Afghanistan and for this I was exiled to Gorky. That was the main reason, and I'm proud of it. I am proud of this exile in Gorky. It was my award. This is the first thing I wanted to say.]

In order to look at the speech of a highly articulate, well-educated native speaker of English, I have chosen three short texts by John Steinbeck. John Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. Steinbeck studied at, but did not graduate from, Stanford University. His books include *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Cannery Row* (1945), *East of Eden* (1952), and many others. Of special interest to Russian culture courses might be his *Russian Journal*, an account, published in 1948, of his travels to the Soviet Union. Steinbeck's Soviet hosts, having read *Grapes of Wrath*, were clearly expecting him to be a fellow traveler, which he turned out not to be.

In this paper I am arguing that the speeches given at the Nobel Luncheon are examples of the highest levels of speech. Steinbeck does not disappoint us when he speaks at the luncheon in 1962. He says, "Literature was not promulgated by a pale and emasculated critical priesthood singing their litanies in empty churches--nor is it a game for the cloistered elect, the tin-horn mendicants of low-calorie despair" (Steinbeck 1962)

The Gunning Fog readability index gives Steinbeck's text a score of 20.66, meaning that it would take over twenty years of education in order to read and comprehend the text easily on one pass. That places our successful reader in her fourth year of graduate work. Like many of Steinbeck's sentences, this one is made difficult by its length. The sentence is forty-seven words long. It is also made difficult by the very high number of words that are low on English word frequency lists.

The top five words in English are here: the, be, and, of, a. Steinbeck gives us two more words from the top 1,000 words in English: low, church. We could argue about whether "low" as an adjective at position 361, should be counted as the same word as low-calorie" when the word "calorie" falls outside the top five thousand words in English. He gives us six words from the top three thousand: critical, empty, literature, elect, priest, pale. The word "elect" occupies position number 2287 as a verb, but that is not the way Steinbeck uses it in this speech. Low frequency usages of high frequency words are a hallmark of difficult texts. Finally, Steinbeck gives us the word "horn," which comes in at number 3687 on the word frequency list.

Eight words in Steinbeck's text fall outside of the top five thousand words in English: promulgate, emasculate, priesthood,

litanies, cloistered, tin, despair, and calorie. That means that seventeen percent of the words in this text are very low frequency. If we bear in mind the literature that tells us that students need to know 95-98 percent of the words in a text in order to actually read the text, we see how challenging Steinbeck's Nobel speech may be.

A numerical analysis of Steinbeck's text misses its beauty and the sheer pleasure we get from reading it or listening to it. What a memorable phrase Steinbeck gives us in "tin-horn mendicants of low-calorie despair."

Finally, when you listen to Steinbeck giving his speech, you hear him mispronounce, or not pronounce according to the phonetic standards given in the dictionaries, the word "promulgate." Who has the power to decide whether John Steinbeck, with his tremendous command of the English language and a Nobel Prize in Literature or an anonymous lexicographer, has the power to determine which pronunciation is correct?

For a second example of Steinbeck's use of English, we turn to the first paragraph from *Cannery Row*. Steinbeck writes,

*Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whore houses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories and flophouses. Its inhabitants are, as the man once said, "whore, pips, gamblers, and sons of bitches," by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, "Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men," and he would have meant the same thing. (Steinbeck 1994, 5)*

Once again the Gunning Fox readability index indicates that the reader should have more than twenty years of formal education to process the text efficiently. The challenge here is the length of the sentences. If we break the sentences into shorter units, without making any other adjustments, we can bring the text down to about a seventh grade

reading level. This text has fifteen words of three syllables or more, which means that there are 112 short words in the text.

Short words in simple sentences have made up some of the most powerful moments in English public speech. Hamlet says “To be or not to be.” President Reagan said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” General MacArthur quips, “I shall return.” And Arnold said, “I’ll be back.” So while the proficiency skill level descriptions suggest that the highest levels reflect the highest registers of language and often, at least in the ACTFL descriptions, sound like written texts, we see that the performance of actual highly articulate native speakers can lead us to the simplest sentences and shortest high frequency words.

Finally, for a third sample of Steinbeck’s language we turn to a phone conversation between the Nobel laureate and president Lyndon Johnson recorded by the White House and available from the Johnson Presidential Library. The call took place on December 4, 1966. Johnson and Steinbeck were friends through their wives, who had spent their college days together at the University of Texas at Austin. Thomas E. Barden, editor of *Steinbeck in Vietnam: Dispatches from the War*, writes of the Johnson-Steinbeck relationship, “Steinbeck and Johnson had a great deal in common, from a general discomfort with Harvard and Yale types and a hatred of communism to their shared passion for social justice” (Barden 2013, xiv).

The call begins with a fairly traditional set of opening lines:

LBJ: Hello.

JS: Hello.

LBJ: John, how are you?

JS: Mr. President, I’m just fine.

The two then continue talking about family and the possibility that Steinbeck will travel to Vietnam to report on the war for a Houston paper. When Steinbeck asks the President about the progress of the war, Johnson switches to the first person plural.

LBJ: We never can be very optimistic, because we never know, but we think that it’s getting better every day.

JS: It sounds that way.

LBJ: We think the one thing that helped a good deal was that they felt the elections would be helpful. They were not. And we think that it’s an endurance contest and that they have about

concluded they can't win but I don't think they know where they, which way to go from there. (Johnson and Steinbeck 1966)  
The call returns to a conversational tone when the topic switches back to the president's health and the wellbeing of both their families.

Steinbeck's speech in this sample does not present the formal register we heard at the Nobel Luncheon or the carefully planned language we found in Cannery Row. The beginning and end of the conversation cover health and family issues. The center is business. The president, while maintaining his down-home style country boy speech throughout, changes registers when the topics change. He switches from the first person singular to the first person plural when the conversation changes from talk about family to information about the progress of the war. Steinbeck, the reporter, redirects the flow of the conversation with his comment, that he smells a change. When Steinbeck says that the mood in North Vietnam seems to be changing, the president responds by saying, "I know that," which seems to end that part of the phone call. And then the conversation goes back to questions about health, which had already been asked and answered. We see in this text, a very informal register yet sophisticated speech acts. Steinbeck is interviewing the President of the United States. President Johnson, while maintaining his carefully crafted persona, skillfully answers questions, pronounces on policy and ends the discussion.

This phone conversation gives important data for our understanding of high-level proficiency. The ILR does not ask us how educated an educated person can sound when an educated person wants to sound educated. The ILR tells us that high level proficiency is performance that approaches that of a highly articulate person, and we have seen that language used by such people bridges many different registers, including seemingly simple chit chat.

### **The Platitudinous Postlude**

We have seen that the yardstick against which second language performance is measured is fraught with difficulties and may be a candidate for reconsideration. We have also seen that the speech performance of people generally recognized as exemplars of highly articulate well-educated speech can be simple or even halting. We have

observed that high-level speech can be carefully crafted, but it can be many other things depending on the audience, the message and the intent to communicate.

At no point in the ILR skill level description does it say that an individual speaking at the highest level of proficiency should always sound like an educated person giving a carefully crafted lecture. People move from level to level and register to register as they speak. A highly articulate well educated native speaker talking to elementary school children about science, or talking to a hostile crowd, or exchanging pleasantries with the neighbors is performing at a high proficiency level even when the register of speech is low or informal. The ability to perform in high registers and sound like written texts without the ability to move across the whole range of registers would be a sign of limited proficiency.

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