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The Culture of Britishness

What role does 'language' play in notions of cultural and national identity in Britain?

This essay will attempt to answer the above question by examining the importance of language in the formation, and then preservation, of nations, nationalisms, and the identities that exist within them. It will then go on to analyse the development of the dominant language of the United Kingdom, English, and how it has sought to position itself as central to notions of British identity. This will be followed by a brief discussion on the nature of other languages within the UK and how they have dealt with the cultural hegemony of English and the standardisation of this language. The processes of differentiation involved in the patterns of language of Britain will then be considered, with reference to the assignment of certain social 'locations' during interaction. The essay will then go on to examine one particular grouping, British-Caribbeans, in order to provide an example of the way in which language can be central to identities. First though it shall begin with a brief mention of some of the ways in which language can be defined.

For Day (1998:151) languages, and other linguistically based practices of communication, represent vital tools in both our ability to organise social interaction, and in the processes by which we are able to identify different social groupings. Language can be used to join people in a multitude of social activities, but it can also demarcate various groups of people as being either the same as, or different from, others in any given society. It is this method of categorisation involved in everyday

communications that has been of interest in conversation analysis and ethnomethodology (ibid:152). However, the fact that language is deep rooted in so much of human behaviour means that identifying all of its functions is extremely difficult (Sapir, 1933).

> *"…it may be suspected that there is little in the functional side of our conscious behaviour in which language does not play its part."*
> *(Sapir, cited in Downes, 1998:1)*

Due to this multitude of roles that language plays a part in, it is perhaps not surprising that the actual word 'language' is also used in many different ways.

At the simplest level 'language' can be used as a word that refers to a set of skills. This can be taken as something that can be learnt as a subject in school, as children and even adults are taught how to read and write in English language lessons for instance. These rules are part of the subject that must be learnt in order to gain appropriate qualifications or techniques, and so it can be said that someone is 'good' or 'bad' at language depending on their attainments. Such rules also provide another use for the term 'language' in that it is not simply a school subject, but a set of grammatical laws containing tenses, nouns and verb structures (Downes, 1998:1). Grammar provides a certain structural element to language, and it is through this that communication and expressions of thought can take place. However, in some cases it is thought that in order to adequately understand a place or a culture, the language must be known to some degree, and this connection is used when attempting to decipher practices that are far removed from simple grammar (ibid). In these cases our knowledge of a particular language is often said to aid our understanding of a cultural phenomenon such as a cricket match, in a way that cannot just be connected to the English grammar that may be involved in its description.

'Language' is also used in conjuncture with the aesthetic value of the sounds that it's speaker's produce. For Downes (ibid) many people hold strong opinions on the beauty or hideousness of the sound of particular groups when speaking. Languages and the different forms they take can be described as being 'nasal', 'guttural' or 'sexy'. The term can also be used to refer to phenomenon that does not involve speech at all, such as body postures in the case of 'body language', and so in this case the word is used as a metaphor (ibid:2). It is clear then that language can be described in a plethora of ways, but it perhaps Chomsky (1986:15) who offers the best definition.

> *"Language is a set of very specific universal principles which are intrinsic properties of the human mind and part of our species' genetic endowment." (Ibid)*

These specific principles of language are expressed throughout the world in a variety of ways, and it is this multitude of different languages, dialects and accents that are often linked to discussions on the nature of nations and nationality. For Tate (2005)

> *"Language has a place in any imagining of the nation." (Ibid)*

The importance of language in the construction of national identity is seen by many social scientists as being key. Snyder (1976:21) suggests that when seeking political identities and security, people who have the same language are inevitably drawn together, whereas Edwards (1991:269) proposes that it is language that is still seen as the main component of ethnic groupings. For Billig (1995:17) the reproduction of nationhood is done not through individual acts, but through socio-historical processes, which language allows to be believed, communicated, imagined, and ultimately remembered. Language therefore helps to shape ideologies, which in the case of nationalism can preserve nation-states, as well as create them. This preservation and

creation of nation-states illustrates the centrality of language in the battle for hegemony, in that so often the formation of states has been accompanied by an official national language being recognised over others (ibid:27). Billig (ibid:31) argues that the very concept of 'language' that is recognised today is one that would not have necessarily developed without the idea of nation. The peasant of millennia ago would not be able to imagine the linguistic boundaries that exist in contemporary times, but in travelling would simply pass along a continuum of comprehension. These boundaries of language are essentially a modern phenomenon that fit formally organised communication with the formal world of nations.

> *"The disciplinary society of the nation-state needs the discipline of a common grammar." (Ibid)*

One such example of a nation-state that has sought to use language to define its national identity is the United Kingdom with English.

The history of the British Isles, in which the UK forms the largest state, is one of invasion and migration from the early Celts to the influx of Afro-Caribbean's in the 20th Century. Language has formed an important part of this history, and the dominance of English has long been the point of contestation. Paulin (1983: 293) suggests that the English language itself was thought only to be spoken by a lower class of individual in the early 14th Century, and that the language of the ruling classes was that of Norman French. This was remedied in 1362 with parliament stating that all law must be conducted in English, and what followed was a period of artistic creativity during Elizabethan and Jacobean times, when the language began to take on similar sentences structures to what is recognised today (ibid). For Kachru (1986:318) colonial times witnessed the start of English becoming the language of commerce, science and technology, as the power that the white colonists displayed was marked

by the manner in which they communicated. In the various British colonies of the world English was used to cultivate groups of people, be they migrants or locals, who would adhere to the cultural practices of the empire's elites. With English being the medium through which technological and cultural developments took place, natives of the colonised territories who wished to further themselves in terms of this development sought out command of the language (ibid:320-321). This was often done in order to gain the power and prestige associated with a social order that had English as the core requirement.

In the UK itself English has been by far the most dominant 'native' language in the past three hundred years, and it has gradually replaced the Celtic tongues such as Gaelic and Welsh (Algeo, 1992:155). Although efforts have been made to revive the various other indigenous tongues, there has been a general decline in the number speaking them in the 20th Century, with Cornish all but dying out. The political pressures that have been associated with their preservation have, like the hegemonic rise of English and the idea of Britain, been intricately connected to nationalist ideologies (Billig,1995:34). In Wales the nationalist movement has sought to promote bilingual education and media, as well as the use of Welsh in legal matters in a bid to further differentiate the practices of this country from the rest of the UK (Algeo, 156). This demonstrates that, for many, languages can be used to represent separateness and to highlight distinctions, two factors that are often key to a nationalist cause. For Billig (ibid) even when there are clear similarities between many of the words used by two differently located peoples, the written word may be used to highlight any differences in speech patterns. For Scottish English, or Lallans, the banning of its use in schools meant that for some period it was replaced by English as Scotland's official

language. However, in an expression of nationalism, Lallans, or Scots, was in the 1980s being differentiated from English as a distinct language, and was being put forward as a separate literary form (ibid).

These responses from some UK language communities to their perceived erosion in the face of English are in somewhat of a contrast to the perceptions involving more recent immigrant languages that have arrived in Britain. The bilingualism that is sought by the Celtic nationalists is often seen as representing a return to more traditional days (Algeo, ibid), but the 'threat' to British national unity that this form of nationalism might bring is more commonly expressed in terms of changes to the socio-political climate of the UK. Thomas (1999:175), however, argues that in terms of languages that have originated in other parts of the world, multilingualism in Britain is seen more as a threat in terms of the cultural changes that it may bring. Lord Tebbitt, at the Conservative Party Conference in 1997, displays the suspicion that often underlies political debate on this subject.

> *"we need common values, a common culture and a single language"*
> *(Tebbitt, cited in Thomas, ibid)*

The British nationality, in such views, is seen as being linked to the one language, English, in a way that Fishman (1972:52) describes as *'contrastive self-identification'*. In this process members of the British nationality are united with those in their location who speak the same language, but feel separate from those who do not. It is when this coupling of British identity and the English language is challenged that hegemonic views on national identity are also threatened (Tate, 2005).

In terms of the English language in Britain and throughout the former colonies, the hegemony that it represents in the production of the nation-state has seen one

particular form take a '*superordinate'* role (Downes, 1998:33). Stewart (1968:535) proposes that this is a process of standardisation of language that sees a particular linguistic variety become an autonomous form, in that it not part of something else. It may be closely related to other languages, but is not subordinate to any and in this way it is thought superior to the any other dialects that are contained within it. The standardised form has higher prestige than its dialects, often due to the fact that it is used in matters of government and law. In the case of English, the standardised form emerged and developed words that could replace the functions formerly filled by Latin and Anglo-Norman (Downes, 1998:35). High prestige was also gained for Standard English by the way in which it was a symbol of national autonomy. For Edwards (1985) the English language is used by some as a symbol of the British nation, and gives people a sense of loyalty towards this aspect of their national identity. Loyalty is also displayed in the manner in which the standard form of English is spoke of in ubiquitous terms that refer to its excellence, and the quality of expressions that can be made through it (Downes, 1998:36). Dialects and external languages can be viewed as a threat to this excellence.

> *"There is often a feeling that these qualities are threatened by degeneration or innovation or outside influences. Those feelings are part and parcel of standardisation" (Ibid)*

The perceived excellence of standardised English is further enhanced in its use by elites, who represent the personification of the power that it represents, but also by its control and management. Writers and other professionals who are firstly thought to hold the knowledge necessary to maintain its standards, and who secondly 'select' from literary works the best examples of the language do this (Milroy, 1992). Downes (1998:38-39) suggests that these guardians of the language invoke notions of what it correct English, and through the use of dictionaries are able to identify that which is

spelt incorrectly, and therefore 'bad' English. Perhaps the most obvious form of 'correct' English is found in the accent of Received Pronunciation, which for many years was the speech used by many of those in British public life. There have though been tensions within this standardising process of English that have existed as long as the language itself. There is the question of the role of dialects, and indeed other languages, in British national identities that challenge the uniformity of the language. For Fairclough (1992:202) there is now a growing acceptance of accent and style variation in the language of Britain, a phenomenon that leads to an even greater emphasis on internal national differentiation.

For Wallwork (1978:31) processes of differentiation involved in the everyday production of language have long been used to assign social standings to individuals and groups. Perhaps the differences that occur in regional and social class dialects have traditionally been the most widely investigated (Edwards, 1976:23), but there is a growing trend towards studying other sub-forms of language, particularly those associated with ethnic groupings in the UK. Edwards (ibid:27) suggests, in line with Wallwork, that speech differences often help to 'locate' the speaker in the appropriate social strata. This process of 'locating' can be applied to people of various ages, genders, ethnic groups and social classes. In fact anyone who 'speaks' can be socially located, through his or her use of language, in Britain today. An extreme example of this is found when a recent immigrant, with little or no knowledge of English, is immediately identified as a foreign 'other'. There are, however, a multitude of other individuals and groups that maintain and adapt their otherness in terms of language in different ways. These people challenge the assumptions involved in some aspects of Britishness, by not only integrating some of their own cultural style and speech into

everyday British language types, but also by 'switching' their own use of language in response to the environments that they find themselves in (Wallwork, 1978:61). Such a phenomenon is witnessed in Britain by the adaptation of Afro-Caribbean Creole languages in day-to-day life.

This creolised form of speech has been associated with 'bad' English, in that it is often taken as a dialect of the standard form, but for Wallwork (ibid:64) it is unintelligible to most other English speakers. The fact that some Caribbean Creole languages are in fact derived, in part, from French further supports the argument that it is a language that is as different from English, as Italian is to Spanish (ibid). For the original immigrants who spoke Creole in the UK, it served as a one of the processes by which they were viewed as 'others' by many in the white population. Dabydeen (1990:306) argues that the perception of a different culture coming into Britain, displayed by, amongst other factors, the strange 'otherness' of speech, led to a continuation of the contempt for black culture that had been witnessed in colonial times. In response to this the children of these original immigrants adapted their parents Creole into an urban patois, which Dabydeen (ibid) sees as resistance to white domination. A similar response can be seen in reggae sound systems that use, or deliberately misuse, western technologies in order to re-create an essentially black phenomenon. By adapting and re-ordering Standard English through the medium of their parents' Creole speech, young blacks are reacting against the dismissals of white language and all that it entails (ibid:307).

The link between language and music can be seen in the 1970s and 1980s with the increased popularity of reggae music, as well as the Ras Tafari philosophy associated

with it. By adopting this particular style, many young British-born Caribbeans also practiced the Jamaican patois that many of its practitioners spoke, and so the various Creoles of the Caribbean were gradually substituted for a more British-Jamaican form (Pollard, 1994). For Sebba and Tate (2002:78) this reason, alongside a shared experience of 'blackness' in the UK, meant that the cultural expression found in the Jamaican based patois speech, was utilised by many in British-Caribbean communities, regardless of their origin. Another point here is that localised forms of English dialect are also used, and these are often interchanged with the patois depending on the nature of the conversation taking place. This represents an important factor in the use of language with regards to nation and culture, in that there exists a duality of British-Caribbean identities (ibid:77). Young blacks in particular may adopt the patois style when addressing each other in what can be said to be a discursive performance, and this also may be the case when attempting to achieve a local identity, such as in the workplace. The use language in this case is one that displays both local and global, or pan-Caribbean, identities. For British-Caribbeans, regional English dialects are used to designate the local, of being British, whereas the use of patois indicates a more global, but at the same time ethnic, identity (ibid:80). This is one particular example of where language is a key factor in constructing both ethnic and national identities in British society.

In conclusion, language is used in order to both separate and unite people in social activities, and is therefore a vital method of categorisation in human behaviour. The term 'language' can be used in a number of different ways. It can be a set of grammatical laws, something that has aesthetic value, or simply used as a metaphor. In terms of their application languages can aid the construction of identity, in that they

mark out the other in terms of what belongs and what does not. In this sense languages can be associated with a particular locations, and so they are closely linked to ideas of the nation-state. Such nation-states often represent a hegemonic struggle that is bound up with the need for a formal grammar when communicating, and this was the case with the rise of English in the UK and its various colonies. In a manner that sought to cultivate both respect and prestige, English became a language of commerce and industry, as well as representing high culture and politics in the regions where it was spoken. The rise of English as a dominant British language, has seen the decline of other British languages, despite attempts to revive them, and also the Anglicisation of many colonies. In recent years, however, the way in which English has come to embody British national identity has been challenged by both the influx of other languages, and the threat to the standardisation of the language from new forms and styles of speech. The process of differentiation that allows English to demarcate the 'other' is being adapted, as demonstrated by the British-Caribbean example, in order to deal with the multiple identities that exist within Britain today. The way in which language has affected such identities is therefore crucial to any notions of culture and nation in Britain.

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