NEW BRITAIN:
THE HERITAGE OF THE PAST AND
THE CHALLENGE OF THE FUTURE

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EDITOR’S NOTE

The papers in the present collection were first presented at the 2nd International Tartu Conference on British Studies New Britain: the Heritage of the Past and the Challenge of the Future which took place at the University of Tartu on 24–25 August 1998. The organizers of the conference were the Estonian Centre for British and Overseas Studies at the Department of English at the University of Tartu and the British Council. On behalf of both hosts of the conference I would like to thank the speakers for their contribution and express a hope that the articles gathered here will be of help in teaching British Studies both at the secondary and tertiary level. The Estonian Centre for British and Overseas Studies and the Department of English at the University of Tartu would like to thank the British Council for their generous support given both to the Conference and the present Proceedings and the British Embassy in Tallinn and in particular His Excellency Mr Timothy J. Craddock, H M Ambassador to Estonia, for his opening address and financial support.

Pilvi Rajamäe
they could retire to the hut and be fractionally less cold. They
could make a cup of tea and, if they were feeling particularly
rakish, have a chocolate digestive biscuit. Afterwards, they
could spend a happy half-hour packing their things away and
closing up hatches. And this was all they required in the world
to bring themselves to a state of near rapture. (Bryson 1995:
97)

To conclude: Despite the changing times there are still English
families who have their holidays in one and the same place every
year, and others, who try to discover more and more exciting and
adventurous locations and activities while on holiday. Anyway, a
holiday is definitely a part of the British cultural habits.

References


AWARENESS IN LANGUAGE:
BRITISH HERITAGE, PRESENT IDENTITY
AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

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This paper attempts to explore how changes in identity and atti-
tudes determined by the past heritage influence the English lan-
guage, causing semantic changes in the existing linguistic items,
the disappearance of lexical units and the appearance of new for-
mations. Language reflects changes in attitudes to political, social
and cultural heritage, and hence changes in identity, which are re-
vealed by language establishing the need to examine language
change as part of British Studies.

Language has emerged as an expression of the most fundamen-
tal questions of the age. Language is alive which is the essence of
its social function. Teaching language as part of identity does not
mean merely teaching grammar and lexical units, it implies se-
matic and stylistic changes which reflect the development of a
nation in all its aspects. The aim is to encourage and raise general
awareness of language (see McCarthy, 1995: Ch. 4) and language
change which goes hand in hand with cultural awareness and iden-
tity. Hence language studies need to become part of British Stud-
ies.

By identity I understand all the qualities, beliefs and ideas
which make people feel they belong to a particular group. Identity
also includes values and attitudes which are all reflected in lan-
guage.
it will no longer be possible for storms in the Channel to isolate the continent. Lady Thatcher was surely right in believing that the Tunnel would do more to establish Britain’s place in Europe and public acceptance of it than all the EC laws and regulations (see Powell, 1994: 9). The word Europe has acquired many meanings: 1) the geographical term for one of the continents, 2) all the continent except Britain and 3) the European Union, each of them revealing a specific stance of the user. Many neologisms have appeared conveying various British attitudes to the prospects of EU membership, for example, a Europessimist vs a Eurooptimist, a Eurosceptic vs a Eurofan or a Euronut (sl.), a Europhobic vs a Euroenthusiast. Whatever position is taken, British identity has obviously acquired a European element.

Each aspect of life in Britain has its own history leaving its footprints in identity and language. It is interesting to trace developments in the English language as a voice of imperial rule. The British Empire became the biggest in the world’s history. In 1914 it comprised a quarter of the world’s population living on a fifth of its land surface. It expanded most dramatically in Queen Victoria’s later years, while the United Kingdom enjoyed a period of so-called Splendid Isolation from European affairs. Trade and overseas assets were increasingly concentrated in this vast Empire which, by 1931, had evolved into the more informal, voluntary confederation of the British Commonwealth. The term the British Empire was officially dropped in 1931 by force of legislation. The loss of the Empire meant the loss of the official Empire language and the acquisition of new political euphemisms. For example, in 1977 The Sunday Times Magazine wrote an article “The Setting Sun” alluding to the loss of the Empire where the sun never set and claiming that since 1952 Britain had discarded almost all her colonies with a grace unique in history. Actually a colony is an undemocratic word today and it is revealing to investigate when and how it was replaced by a dependant territory and later by an overseas territory. The British Commonwealth was replaced by the term the Commonwealth to avoid the idea of British domination. And indeed there have been instances when the rest of the Commonwealth countries have disagreed with Britain, as was the case...
with the Commonwealth conference in 1989 when all the Commonwealth countries voted for sanctions against South Africa, except Britain, which created a crisis. The message was that if 48 countries voted against one, then it was Britain who had to leave. Britain did not withdraw as it would have created difficulties for the Queen in domestic affairs in Britain.

The English language has not come to terms with Britain’s colonial legacy as yet. Some empire thinking still lingers on. Although metric measures were introduced in 1971, imperial measures are still applied (yards, miles etc.). There used to be quite a number of companies with the word “imperial” in their names. Some have retained it today, like the Imperial Chemical Industries. It is interesting that the Queen is still awarding imperial orders, e.g. OBE — the Order of the British Empire, KBE — the Knight of the British Empire or the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. These awards are mainly given to men and women for services to Britain, not to the British Empire.

An awareness of class forms a major part of most people’s sense of identity, as language is an important aspect of class and is sociolinguistically marked, suffice to mention the famous phrase uttered by Prince Charles, “One must do one’s duty”. Sharon Goodman has made a special study of the use of “one” in royalese. British newspapers, especially tabloids, represent “the Queen’s English” in their stories about the Royal Family, using the pronoun “one” and punning on it to create a clash of register (Goodman, 1997). The Guardian wrote after the presentation of the Queen’s Speech in Parliament that “one’s Government seemed to have run out of ideas” (17 November 1994). When the Queen dismissed 35 employees at Buckingham Palace (after the fire at Windsor Palace), The Sun wrote an article with the headline “One has sacked 35”, communicating that her Majesty was axing jobs to save money. When talking about 1992, the Queen called it one of her worst years and labelled it “an annus horribilis” (Latin for “a horrible year”). This Latin phrase became notorious and was much quoted in 1992. The Sun published another article “One’s Bum Year” which lends itself to punning very well due to the polysemy of the word “bum”. The incompatibility of styles is created by the use of the formal pronoun. The change in register is significant, as style is part of language and hence part of identity.

A clash of style of this sort is even more effective against the background of the general trend to use more democratic language. As similar process of “democratisation” is seen in the style of dressing, it is fashionable to dress down, not to dress up. The same tendency is demonstrated by a change in attitudes to regional English which has been going on for the past decades. The trend for language to grow more democratic is also seen in the image of many public figures. The style of Tony Blair, for instance, is certainly less formal than that of his predecessors which is in line with the so-called new labour and a more democratic party image. It is exciting to compare different editions of the same official publication with an eye to style and language when the same facts and events are described. Note the change in the choice of words in the Official Handbook of Britain in the following examples. Interestingly, the name of the publishing house of the Official Government Handbook has changed from HMSO to the Stationery Office.

“In 1801 the Act of the Union of Great Britain and Ireland, which joined the Irish Parliament to the Parliament of Great Britain established the United Kingdom” (Britain, 1995: 22).

“During the tenth century Ireland was dominated by the Vikings. In 1169 Henry II of England launched an invasion of Ireland...”

“... under the 1801 Act of Union the Irish Parliament was abolished...” (Britain, 1998: 12–13).

The attitude of British people to the dominance of England is part of their identity, as the political unification of Britain was not achieved by mutual agreement. Today English domination can be detected in the way in which various aspects of British public life are described, as well as in the names of a number of public institutions and practises, e.g. the central bank of the UK is the Bank of
England, and there is no such thing as a “Bank of Britain” (see O’Driscoll, 1996: Ch. 1). The dominance of England is reflected in the organisation of the British Government. There are Ministers for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but there is no Minister for England. The distinction of England/English vs Britain’s/British is both politically and culturally important. The failure to distinguish these terms has caused many blunders and created sensitive situations. This attitude is sometimes called domination by omission by analogy of the sin of omission when the other three parts of the UK are just not mentioned, although the whole of Britain is meant. An interesting development is the use of the word country for each of the nations of the UK. This trend has increased in the nineties. Thus Britain is not England alone, there are three other countries: the country of Wales, the country of Scotland and the country of Northern Ireland.

There are many areas of British Studies which give an insight into British values and attitudes that can be easily taught through language, such as Anglo-American relations (note the use of Anglo), including the borrowing of Americanisms in the English language, the history and the twentieth century developments of relations between Britain and France, issues of gender identity and many others.

In conclusion, changes in the English language reflect changes in Britain and British identity. Many aspects of British Studies can be acquired through language at regular classes as language is an important feature of identity.

References


