

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

*Proceedings of the 2nd International Tartu Conference
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Editor Pilvi Rajamäe

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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.

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

Anita Naciscione

Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia

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

Language has emerged as an expression of the most fundamental 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 semantic 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 identity. Hence language studies need to become part of British Studies.

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 language.

As a cultural identity, Englishness has always been complex, changeable, self-contradictory. Exactly the same applies to Scottishness, Welshness and Irishness. All the different cultures in these countries certainly do not turn into "a bland and homogeneous Britishness" (Colley, 1995: A1), there is an entity which can be qualified as British alongside with the identities of the four countries.

The cultural awareness of language is not something that can be taught or practised at short notice, it needs to be taught at school starting with the beginner's level up to the advanced. It is already at an early stage of language acquisition when teachers bring out the insular character and psychology of the British *clinging to their tight little, right little island* as an early 19th century song goes. Britain is seen to be a world in itself as opposed to the Continent, as it is demonstrated by a curious headline in a London paper, "Fog over the English Channel. The Continent is isolated." The contrast *Britain vs the Continent* allows to show the various meanings of *the Continent* and *continental* and the British/English attitudes and beliefs. This is very well seen in the two types of breakfasts. A *continental breakfast* is usually worse in quality, while *English breakfast* is normally cooked and offers more variety. Swearing using zoological names is regarded by some to be a continental habit. In English the same negative feelings are infrequently expressed by intonation, understatement, euphemism, or some other stylistic means.

Another significant opposition is *Britain vs Europe*. Traditionally *Europe* is seen to be a territory across the English Channel, very often it is France. For instance, a book on *European literature* does not include any British writers. Britain's accession to the EEC in 1973 introduced major political and economic changes. It has also been bringing about changes in thinking and attitudes with every single development. The Channel Tunnel, for example, created a lot of debate. Would it bring Britain closer to the Continent? Or would it bring the Continent closer to Britain? What would the adverse effects be? Anyway it is clear that the Channel Tunnel is going to have a profound psychological impact on how the next generation feel about Britain in relation to the European landmass:

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. I). 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.

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