
**Language,
Society
and Power**

An introduction

Second edition

Linda Thomas, Shân Wareing,
Ishtla Singh, Jean Stilwell Peccei,
Joanna Thornborrow and
Jason Jones

This edition revised and edited by
Ishtla Singh and Jean Stilwell Peccei

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Chapter 6

Language and ethnicity

Ishtla Singh

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Chapter 6

6.1 Introduction

During my time in Britain, I have met a number of people who make very interesting (if inaccurate) assumptions about the type of person I must be. When I first arrived, my ability to ‘speak English really well’ was often commented on as surprising and laudable, and seemed to contribute in some measure to my acceptability into the community I had entered. One person, deaf to my protestations, praised me for giving up my ‘native Jamaican’ for English (even though I’m from Trinidad and a creole speaker). On the other hand, this mistaken assumption also led someone else, equally unshakable in their convictions, to call me a ‘coconut’ (White on the inside, Black on the outside), and to accuse me of ‘forgetting my roots’. I have been called a ‘fucking nigger’ by a random passer-by, and advised by another not to be a ‘traitor to my people’ in a foreign country. The notion of ‘my people’ has also generated quite a bit of comment. Many were incredulous at the fact that there is a significant Asian presence in Trinidad, others insisted that I couldn’t possibly be “‘pure” Asian’ because I had been born in the Caribbean and therefore must have African branches in my family tree. On one memorable occasion, someone explained at length that the reason I wasn’t a good swimmer but a good runner lay in my alleged ‘Ethiopian genes and race memory’.

It’s important to note that these types of occurrences did not make up the bulk of my experiences. I also met, and continue to meet, many people who do not appear to make such assumptions. However, what interested me about these instances was what they revealed about people’s varying ideas and stereotypes of ethnicity, and of the perceived relationships between ethnic grouping and language use. Let’s now look at the issues involved in a bit more detail.

6.2 What is ethnicity?

One of the things that’s very clear from the instances just cited is that people made different assumptions about what ethnic group I belonged to. For some, this seemed to be based on my skin colour and/or my apparent ‘race’

classification, or on the place (they thought) I was from. Indeed, these various interpretations of ethnicity are not unusual: my students, for example, when asked to define *ethnic* and *ethnicity*, consistently produce statements such as 'to be ethnic is to be Black', or 'ethnicity is to do with your roots, or your culture', or 'ethnicity means race'. Importantly, these all contain a kernel of truth, since *ethnic* is ultimately derived from the Greek *ethnos* or 'nation'; and a nation is defined as a community which has a common history, cultural tradition and language. Since we each have cultural, historical and linguistic affiliations, we each also have an ethnic identity, in terms of which we can be (and often are) labelled. However, an individual can have more than one ethnic label, ranging from those they choose to those that are decided for them, again, as is evident in the examples I have just given.

It is noteworthy that discussions about ethnicity often make use of the concepts *ethnic majority* and *minority*. In contexts where ethnic majorities and minorities co-exist, the former term typically refers to a group which shares a socially dominant culture and the latter, to a group which shares ethnic affiliations that are socially marginalised. In many contemporary settings, the ethnic majority has been established for a longer period of time and the minority groups are the more recent products of migration, although it must be noted that this is not always the case. In the histories of Australia, the United States and Britain for example, settled Aboriginal, Native American and Celtic peoples (and their cultures) respectively became displaced and marginalised by later European migrants. In addition, majorities and minorities do not necessarily entail a significant numerical difference. In the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, for instance, many European powers colonised West Indian islands, setting up sugar plantations cultivated by imported African slaves. Each island had a few large plantations, each home to a European planter, who had perhaps been accompanied by his immediate family, and about fifty to sixty slaves. Thus, in most islands, African slaves actually outnumbered their European masters: in Barbados (an island colonised by Britain) in 1684, for example, there were 19,508 British but 62,136 African slaves (Watts 1987: 311). However, this numerically larger group of slaves was, socially and politically, an ethnic minority.

The one thing that all instances of co-existing majorities and minorities have in common however, is the fact that the socio-cultural dominance of the former group establishes their ideologies, or 'assumptions, beliefs and value-systems' (Simpson 1993: 3, see Chapter 2), as norms which, it is typically assumed, 'everyone' shares. Thus, it has not been uncommon to hear or read statements such as 'England is a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant country', or that 'everybody speaks English here [in Britain]'. Statements such as these are often presented, and taken, as 'common sense': they represent a 'normal'

state of affairs. In actuality however, they represent, and in so doing enforce, a perception of the racial, cultural and linguistic characteristics of one group as primary and typical. In such discourses, the ethnic affiliations of other, minority groups are rendered invisible (because they are not talked about), or are marked as 'different' at best, or 'deviant' at worst, by comparison. Thus, in our example, those who are not English-speaking WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) can be represented as outsiders to the norm: an approach which is explicitly taken by certain groups who profess to be the mouthpiece of an ethnic majority, as we shall see in section 6.3.

The association between certain ethnic characteristics and difference from the norm therefore means that terms such as *ethnic* have come to denote anything perceived as racially and/or culturally distinct from the mainstream. For example, when an American Airlines flight crashed en route to the Dominican Republic in November 2001, an airport spokesman stated 'We know it was a very *ethnic* flight' (*The Guardian*, 13 November 2001). Hugh Massingberd, in his review of *British Food* by Colin Spencer (*The Daily Telegraph*, 14 December 2002), comments on the fact that the most popular '*ethnic* sauce' of the past fifty years is sweet and sour, and that modern Britain loves 'spicy *ethnic* food'. Sukhdev Sandhu, in another book review (*Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*, *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 September 2002), observes that the fashion industry is no longer taken with the Goths, who generally tend to be middle-class and White. Instead, they prefer "'street", urban, *ethnic*'.

So far, we have been assuming that defining ethnicity, or ethnic identity, is fairly straightforward: it is something we all have, and it is either part of mainstream norms or marked as distinct from those norms. However, because ethnicity includes so many different characteristics, it can sometimes be much more multilayered. For example, in modern Britain, it is possible to distinguish four major long-established ethnic groups: the English, the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish. Members of all four groups share a 'British' identity, but might also choose to identify themselves as Welsh, Scots, English or Irish respectively, since each denotes a distinct group with a particular history, cultural practices and even linguistic affiliations. Some members may also have, and acknowledge, other ethnic associations at the same time, such as an Asian, African or Chinese heritage. Labels such as *British Asian* and *Black British* go some way towards encoding such ethnic multidimensionality.

BBC Radio 1 effectively illustrated this multilayering of ethnic identity in 1997, with an advertisement for a helpline for victims of racial harassment. It began with two men, one English; the other Scottish, arguing and trading insults based on the other's ethnicity. A third man, with an Indian accent,

then intervened, causing the Englishman and Scotsman to claim solidarity as ‘real’ British, and turn on him as a member of a migrant minority group. A Frenchman then joined in, which caused the Englishman, Scotsman and British Asian to claim solidarity as ‘British’ and to carry on a well-established tradition of hostility with France. An American then stepped in, causing the Frenchman and the ‘British’ to merge into ‘Europeans’. The sketch ended with the appearance of a Martian, which then united the rest as ‘Earth humans’.

Thus, the fact that ethnic identity can incorporate many different characteristics means that its definition is neither clear-cut nor uniform. In addition, as we have seen, certain (perceived) characteristics may be given priority over others in the formulation of ethnic labels. To return to the personal experiences cited at the beginning of this chapter, I choose to label myself *Asian-Caribbean*, which acknowledges what I consider to be the two major strands in my ethnic heritage. However, some people class me as *Afro-Caribbean*, which recognises one element of my ethnicity (*Caribbean*) as distinctive, but negates my Asian affiliations by placing me in a category that seems to mean ‘non-White’ (*Afro*). And the person who shouted the offensive *nigger* at me had clearly prioritised physical characteristics (primarily again, that category of ‘non-White’) in choosing that particular label.

Such labels all feed into the different ‘angles of telling’ (Simpson 1993, see Chapter 2) that can be adopted in representing and reinforcing perceptions of ethnicity. In particular, the angles on ethnic minority groups which are ‘told’ by majority groups can have a powerful effect on perception, since they are disseminated through the mainstream, ‘norm-upholding’ branches of institutions such as the media and educational systems. We turn to examples of such ‘angles’ in Section 6.3.

ACTIVITY 6.1

The *London Metro* (17 March 2003) reported that a documentary to be screened in April 2003 would name David Beckham, a White British-born footballer, ‘Britain’s most famous black [*sic*] man’. On what grounds could such an ethnic classification be made? In other words, what are the attributes that might qualify someone for ‘Black ethnicity’, or any other for that matter? Consider this with a group and compare your answers. Do you think that they are adequate to qualify someone for ‘re-classification’, or does ethnic affiliation have a dimension that we need to be ‘born into’?

6.3 The language of prejudice

I stated in the last section that the ideologies of ethnic majority groups become established as norms, and that everything that does not conform is represented, and perceived, as different and peripheral. This also holds true in the context of representations and perceptions of ethnicity: that of the majority group comes to be seen, and talked about, as the norm, and that of minority groups as 'other'. This is typically achieved in discourse by explicitly creating an opposition between *us* and *them*, and making use of negative labelling and stereotyping. These are not discrete processes, as we shall see below.

6.3.1 Marking *us* and *them*

One of the assumptions on which the 1997 Radio 1 advertisement mentioned in section 6.2 was predicated was that, in 'angles of telling' on ethnicity, there is often a separation into what can be referred to as *us* and *them*. When the Englishman insults the Scotsman on his nationality, he is expressing assumptions on behalf of his group: *we* English who hate *them*, the Scots. The same goes for the Scotsman's insults to the English. As the different characters enter and affiliations change, so do the *us* and *them* groups; from *we* the 'real' British versus the *them* of the Asian immigrant community, to *we* of Earth versus the *them* of another planet.

Real-life, explicit instances of this kind of ideological division can be found in the discourses of political groups who present themselves as the mouthpiece of an ethnic majority, such as the British National Party (BNP). Some of their literature, such as that available on their website,¹ reflects (and, no doubt, hopes to perpetuate) their opposition to the immigration of certain ethnic groups into the UK. The discourse is therefore structured towards a particular 'angle of telling': the relevant ethnic minority groups are portrayed as a somewhat dangerous 'other', a *them* who threaten the well-being and security of *us*, a group which is assumed to include visitors to the website.

For example, the introductory address states that the BNP's aim is to nurture a 'feeling of national and cultural unity among *our* people', and makes reference to '*our* ancestors' whose efforts have made Britain '*our* country'. '*Our* innovations and ideas' are hailed as the foundation of the modern world. The reader, who is addressed explicitly as *you*, and who, importantly, is assumed to share *our* beliefs and *our* (White British) ethnicity, is asked 'Isn't it time *we* put *our* own people first? Like *you*, *we* say "yes".' The threat to *us* is constructed as being posed by immigrants who threaten *your* job, and take away the benefits of *your* taxes and *your* wages. Graphs and

statements are included which indicate ‘the speed with which *we’re* losing *our* country’ as ‘flood[s] of immigrants and bogus “asylum seekers” [pour] into Britain’. The BNP therefore propose, as a solution to what they call ‘the immigration problem’, that all ‘non-white [*sic*] immigration’ into Britain be stopped, and a system of voluntary resettlement put in place whereby already resident non-Whites ‘would be encouraged to return to their lands of origin’. Otherwise, the ‘British people’ will become a minority in ‘*our* own land’.

One of the many interesting things about such an angle of telling is the assumptions about ethnic groupings on which it is predicated. As mentioned above, the constant address of the reader as *you*, interspersed with comments about *our* heritage and country, suggests that the intended audience not only belongs to a White, British majority but also, very importantly, shares the same beliefs and attitudes. However, the notion of ‘the British people’ is less clear-cut: this grouping would seem to be based more on ‘being White’, and less on being born in Britain, since there are certainly generations of non-White, British-born people who are clearly excluded. This is underlined by the fact that ‘British people’ are threatened by ‘non-White immigration’, which implies that migration of other ‘White’ groups is acceptable. ‘Non-White’ migrants are labelled consistently as ‘bogus asylum seekers’, a phrase which has contemporary currency in certain UK newspapers, and which reflects and perpetuates a belief that many, if not all, migrants enter the country under false pretences.

It is noteworthy that such clearly explicit divisions between *us* and an alien *them* are now to be found mainly in the discourses of those who are themselves generally considered to be on the fringe of the mainstream. For example, the BNP put themselves forward as a representative of ‘the British people’, but the sector of the population who consider their views extreme appears to outnumber their supporters. This is not to say that notions of *us* and *them* no longer have general, mainstream currency. Indeed, in some areas of the British press, for example, the ethnic ‘other’ (and the associated ‘immigration problem’) seems to have become fused with fears about terrorism. *The Sun* newspaper (16 January 2003), for example, opens its editorial comment on the death of Stephen Oake (referred to in Chapter 2) with a sentence that links the event with immigration: ‘If Britain wasn’t such a soft touch, Steve Oake would be alive today’.

Like the BNP, *The Sun* assumes that the reader shares the value system it expresses here. It also assumes that the reader understands the associations of *soft touch*, a phrase commonly used in Britain in derogatory descriptions of the country’s supposedly lax immigration policy. However, to make the connection between high numbers of immigrants and Stephen Oake’s death, the reader must also make a perceptual link, as the article does, between migrants and the notion of the threatening ‘other’. Once this is done, the

dangerousness of *them* is reinforced by its correlation with the actual, physical death of one of *us*. The article goes on to state that Stephen Oake had been sent to arrest a ‘bogus asylum seeker’ who allegedly belonged to an al-Qa’ida cell; that there are unknown numbers of ‘terrorists’ in the country, living off the system while plotting to overthrow it, and that such ‘extremists’ should not be allowed in. It is arguable that the combination of such labels, which have highly negative associations, works to reflect and reinforce a strong perception of the dangerous outsider.

The consistent and repeated use of such negative **collocations** can therefore play a significant part in the angles of telling adopted for ethnic minority groups. In the following section, we look at a related phenomenon, the use of negative labelling, in a bit more detail.

6.3.2 Negative labelling

The data from *The Sun* and the BNP website demonstrate how ethnic minority groups can be constructed, in certain types of discourse, into threatening social stereotypes through negative association with concepts that carry immediacy for many people: *they* take the benefit of *our* taxes and endanger not only *our* job security but even *our* lives. Such negative constructions can also be, and often are, aided or achieved through the use of ‘labels of primary potency’ (Allport 1990: 248).

When we are asked to describe someone, for example, there are all sorts of different characteristics that we can focus on – hair and eye colour, height, disposition, accent, and so on. However, Allport states, there are certain characteristics which seem to carry more perceptual potency than others, and these are the ones which signal difference from what is considered mainstream. Thus, if a person is perceived as ethnically distinctive or as physically incapacitated, for example, then these are the attributes we may notice, and name, first. Allport (1990: 248) argues that the resultant ‘labels of primary potency . . . prevent alternative classification’. In other words, they direct our perception of the described person. He quotes an example from Irving Lee, in which a man who had lost the sight in both eyes was consistently labelled as a ‘blind man’. For those to whom this characteristic was primary, his other attributes, such as being ‘an expert typist, a conscientious worker, a good student, a careful listener, a man who wanted a job’ went unrealised. Thus, he found it difficult to get a job typing telephone orders for a department store, because the personnel representative couldn’t get beyond what he perceived to be a wholly debilitating disability: “‘But you’re a blind man” he [personnel representative] kept saying, and one could almost feel his silent assumption that

somehow the incapacity in one aspect made the man incapable in every other' (Allport 1990: 248).

It is worth noting that, thirteen years on, such occurrences are arguably less frequent. Many societies have adopted, at the very least, more outwardly liberal perspectives which seek to prevent such discrimination. This is not to say that certain characteristics have lost their 'potency' for everyone; indeed, as we have seen so far in this chapter, this is certainly not the case when it comes to ethnicity. However, it has become much more difficult in certain public domains to talk explicitly and derogatorily about, and act upon, perceived difference from the mainstream. Change in language use does not mean immediate change in attitude, and for the time being, negative attitudes to ethnic minority groups can be channelled into 'angles of telling' which associate them with social threat and danger.

In terms of explicit negative ethnic labelling, it is still possible to hear the use of racist terminology, which clearly signals the 'otherness' of the group or person being named. It is a particularly potent form of abuse because it leaves the addressee feeling powerless; that they have been arbitrarily dumped into a morass of negative perceptions which allows no recognition of them as acceptable individuals. Members of various ethnic minority groups have attempted to 'take power back' by reclaiming such terminology, as we shall see later in this section.

Another way in which groups can be negatively labelled is through the constant use of identity terms which have come to encode negative social stereotypes. Andersen (1988), for instance, pointed out that the label 'Black' was often linked in the British media with negative signs such as *hate, fight, riot*. Van Dijk (1991), in a study of the British right-wing and popular press, stated that the reporting of negative topics, such as crime, becomes 'over-ethnicised', but the reporting of stories considered positive becomes 'de-ethnicised', as the following excerpt from a letter to the press indicates:

Can you explain why black Englishmen and women who win Olympic medals or excel at games are described as 'English' while those who riot and throw petrol bombs are almost inevitably 'West Indian'?
(reproduced in van Dijk 1991: 212)

In modern Britain, labels such as *Jamaican* and *Muslim* are particularly potent for some speakers. The former has featured heavily in discussions of illegal drugs entering the country, and the latter in post-9/11 debates. It is worth noting that every speech community around the world has its own negative ethnic labels. For example, in Trinidad, the label *small islander* (which refers to people who have migrated from poorer and smaller islands, such as

Grenada and St Vincent) is derogatory. No doubt *Trinidadian* is used equally negatively in speech communities in these areas! Again, however, the consistent use of ethnic labels which come to have derogatory associations can be just as potent as racist terminology – they simultaneously reinforce negative stereotypes of the group being named and disempower them.

This brings us to the phenomenon of reclamation mentioned earlier. Members of ethnic minorities sometimes attempt to reduce, or remove, the power of derogatory ethnic labelling by using those terms among themselves, as positive markers of group identity. For example, in my high school in Trinidad, one of our prefects with Afro-Caribbean ethnicity frequently addressed our class (comprising females mainly with Afro-Caribbean and Asian-Caribbean ethnicities) as *niggers*. In such a context, the term was not considered or treated as offensive to the majority, who could claim ethnic solidarity with her and each other as ‘non-White’. However, our other prefect (of White British ethnicity) could not, and did not, use such a term, since to do so would have re-created an uneasy colonial relationship between a socio-politically powerful White majority and correspondingly powerless Black minority.

An interesting debate over the status of *nigger* as a reclaimed label surfaced with the release in 1997 of Quentin Tarantino’s film *Jackie Brown*. Tarantino claimed that the dialogue of his Black characters from the ghetto needed to include the use of such terms if it was to be received as real and immediate:

Ordell’s [one of the main black characters] . . . a black guy who throws the word around a lot, it’s part of the way he talks . . . that’s just who he is and where he comes from . . . If you’re writing a black dialect, there are certain words you need to make it musical, and ‘nigger’ is one of them.

(James 1998: 8)

Tarantino’s argument therefore seemed to be that he was capturing, and in a sense celebrating, the ‘natural’ cadences of a certain type of African-American speech, and the reclaimed ingroup use of once derogatory labels had become part of that. Director and producer Spike Lee however, criticised Tarantino’s script, stating that since the Black characters are fictional, what is ultimately the source of the taboo term is Tarantino’s White voice – one which, by virtue of its place in the majority group, cannot use such terminology in a positive way.

Such issues are not easily resolved but they do show that it is difficult to reclaim certain labels totally as positive markers of ethnic identity. Because

they continue to be used as terms of ethnic abuse, and ultimately because ethnic prejudice continues to occur, they retain a certain measure of negative potency.

Reclamation of abusive or derogatory labels is not the only way in which ethnic minorities can claim solidarity and assert their ethnic individuality: they can, and often do, choose to do so through language use. This is, however, an undertaking that can also become fraught with difficulties, as we will see in the next section.

ACTIVITY 6.2

One way of discovering how a particular minority group is viewed by the majority is to look at the number of insult terms that exist for that group. Make a list of all the ethnically or racially marked insult terms that you can think of and group them according to the ethnic groups they refer to. Are there terms which seem particularly potent to you? Ask friends or family to do the same. Are your judgements similar? Consider, with a group, what kinds of factors can affect mainstream perspectives on minority groups, both favourably and unfavourably.

6.4 Language use as a marker of ethnic identity

A perception of, and angle of telling on, an ethnic group's 'otherness' creates, for some members of that group, a desire to acculturate to what is considered mainstream. This 'desire' is often fed by an association of mainstream cultural norms with social success. However, for many members of that group, the pull of the mainstream is not a straightforward affair – there is often a tension between acculturation to wider norms (both culturally and linguistically) and the maintenance of individual ethnic identity. Thus, members of ethnic minorities continue to participate in cultural, religious and linguistic practices which mark them as distinctive. In terms of language use, this can mean preserving or revitalising² a mother tongue different from that utilised and made official by the ethnic majority. Such choices are not always perceived favourably by members of majorities, who have the power to curtail and obstruct them. Language policy in the United States, to which we now turn, provides us with an effective case study. Since this is quite a huge subject area, the following section concentrates on a few salient developments.