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A Conservative Britishness: A Critical Linguistics Analysis of a Conservative Policy Recommendation Report

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1. The Context: Britishness

Historian Linda Colley, analysing the forging of British identity after the English-Scottish union of 1707, compares eighteenth-century Great Britain to "the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: both three [England, Wales and Scotland] and one, and altogether something of a mystery" (1992:13). Even now nationality in the UK has a peculiar status: historically a state nation rather than nation state, rarely referred to by its full name (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and often by a metonymy (Britain), the country is usually held to comprise four[1] "native" nations to which, according to 2001 census, its people claim varying degrees of allegiance, with 49 per cent rejecting the label *British* altogether[2]. This is further

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[1] The usual number of nationalities is four – English, Scottish, Welsh and (Northern) Irish, though Peter J. Taylor (2001:128) gives ways of conceptualising the "native" population of the UK as up to seven nations.

[2] In the 2001 census, 31 per cent Britons identified as "only British" and 15 per cent chose a combined identification – "British and English / Scottish / Welsh / other".

complicated by the UK's imperial past, when – for a time – every fourth person in the world was a British subject, and its multicultural present, with around 8 per cent of British population hailing from the former Commonwealth countries. No wonder, then, that Britishness is a complex and contested notion, constantly negotiated by the British people, scholars[3] and politicians[4].

In 2007, as commissioned by the Conservative leader David Cameron, Conservative Policy Review groups produced a series of reports on pivotal issues in British life and politics to be considered by Conservatives in their next election manifesto. The report on national security, and specifically its section published in January as *Uniting the Country* - an interim report on social cohesion, is of particular importance here since it explicitly addresses the question of national identity in a multicultural Britain, focusing on the Muslim minority. While the term "British Muslim" clearly denotes a religious, not an ethnic minority, it has in practice become shorthand for Britons of South Asian origin, mostly descending from Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants. According to the 2001 census, they comprise about a half of the UK's ethnic minority population. The issue of the national allegiance of this group came to the fore following the 2005 London Underground terrorist attacks perpetrated by British-born Muslims. The interim report looks at factors impeding the integration of British Muslims into the majority community and sets out what it calls a "shared British agenda" (132-133) which could form the basis for such integration.

The aim of this paper is to attempt an analysis, using the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis, of the ways Britishness or British identity is constructed and situated in the report. While it is unusual to limit an analysis to a single text, the import of this document is substantial: it received considerable publicity and was discussed in all British quality newspapers and some tabloids, thus likely gaining wide

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[3]   See Colley 1992, Morley and Robbins 2001
[4]   Note, for instance, Tony Blair's famous *Cool Britannia* speech, discussed among others in Morley and Robbins 2001

readership; it was likely to influence the policy of a major UK party and possibly the next British government; it is in marked contrast to Conservative discourse of 1980s.[5] Selected lexico-grammatical functions will be analysed along the lines suggested by Barker and Galasiński (2001:64-82) to show that Britishness in the report is positively charged; vague; inclusive and independent of ethnic origin; overlapping with Conservative values and ideas.

2. Pronouns and Processes

As a policy recommendation report, the text follows the genre conventions, where descriptions of the (problematic) status quo interwoven with utterances of informants and followed or interspersed by policy recommendations of deontic modality, and is written in the first person plural. Thus, a key pronoun is *we / us / our*. Out of its 234 occurrences, about 30 are unambiguously attributable to the Policy Group that authored the report, comprising what Fairclough (1989:127) terms *exclusive we*: "we have taken evidence from a wide range of individuals" (109), "A researcher in the area told us" (123); a small number are ambiguous, as in "terrorism has made us conscious of our vulnerability" (103); while a vast majority of the rest can be classified as *inclusive we* that includes the addressee: "if we wish to remain a liberal society" (103), "we need to rebuild Britishness" (134), "building a solid consensus . . . about our identity and values as British citizens" (108). It should be noted that the pronoun *we* is not used to refer to the (explicitly named) majority community, which is written about in the third person singular. 15 (again exclusive) instances of *we* come from the direct quotations from (British Muslim) informants and 24 are related to other entities altogether. The most frequent referent of *they* is British Muslims, mostly as "ordinary" (103) Muslims, occasionally as radical or extremist Muslims. On one sole occasion, the adjective British without a further modifier, firmly associated with the pronoun *we*, denotes a Muslim: "by arranging for

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[5]   See Smith 1994; Lynch 1999.

them to take a British husband or wife" (119); this is in the context of a Bangladeshi or Pakistani national marrying a British Muslim.

   This proportion of pronouns, with the primary division between *we* and *they* and with such a plenitude of inclusive *we*, seems to indicate that the producers of the report – a Conservative policy group – position themselves as capable and entitled to articulate the British agenda and identity for and on behalf of the British people. As the object of scrutiny, British Muslims are singled out as a distinct group[6], partly in opposition to which Britishness is defined, but are not on principle barred from "entering the mainstream" (137) of British society.

   A brief analysis of transitivity as proposed, after Halliday, by Barker and Galasinski (2001:70-73) reveals that the document is replete with nominalisations and passivisations, problematising the issue of agency. One purpose they often serve is to avoid or mitigate criticism of some Muslim practices deemed less compatible with Western lifestyle:

> The recent controversy unleashed in the media over the wearing of the veil has heightened the political temperature without resolving anything. (...) In the majority community, it showed increased apprehensiveness about the extent to which values are shared across community lines. Women displayed particular sensitivity, not just because they felt that the veil limited the prospects of individual Muslim women by isolating them (106)

   In the second sentence, what would have been the subject (the majority community) experiencing an emotion (was scared or worried) becomes an environment where a phenomenon can be perceived; the link between the senser and the phenomenon is thus weakened. What would have been the subject in the second clause (communities who do or do not share the undefined but presupposed British values) again becomes an environment, making the charge against said communities less direct. In the third sentence, the noun

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[6]   The report does acknowledge explicitly on several occasions that British Muslims do not form one homogeneous block but differ with respect to numerous factors, such as ethnicity, social class, and aims and aspirations; nonetheless, *British Muslims* is the most common form of reference.

"veil" chosen as the subject and agent replaces the possible phrases "a woman's personal choice to wear a veil" or the "pressure a Muslim community exerts on a woman to wear a veil". Those example alternatives imply rather more agency (and factors at work) than a noun denoting an external and inanimate object, and so a greater distance, possibly involving volition, between non-Muslim and Muslim British women.

Notably, this strategy is not applied to behaviours or bodies held to be incompatible (rather than less compatible) or hostile to presupposed British values. Attribution of responsibility in those cases is clear and unambiguous:

> In some instances [propagators of political Islam] seek to overthrow the institutions of democracy to institute a state governed by Sharia law. (103)

> Muslim community organisations, of which there are many that do important social work, are nevertheless not offering the leadership they should at the top level. (103)

> Traditional patterns of authority do not foster discussion. (107)

It may be understood therefore that one way in which nominalisations and passivisations work is to draw the boundaries of a British identity – specifically to increase, as far as possible, the inclusivity of the notion.

The other frequent context for nominalisations and passivisations, often combined with overwording, is to sidestep or alleviate criticism of actions or phenomena occurring in what is termed the "mainstream" (107) British society, or to diminish its responsibility for actions:

> We hear much at present about the defects of our past: for instance the – undoubted – blemishes in our colonial record and our participation in the slave trade. Past wrongs should not be hidden. They should be known about and discussed. (132-133)

'The defects of our past", "blemishes", and "wrongs", though acknowledged, remain agentless. The choice of "we hear [. . .] about" as the introductory phrase can be viewed as distancing the

speaker/writer from what follows, creating associations with hearsay evidence.

A certain asymmetry of involvement and responsibility is obscured by nominalisations in the example below:

> [T]here is a new social bargain to be struck: a more explicit acceptance on the part of the majority community of the importance of helping minorities to integrate to be matched by minorities' willingness to equip themselves to be active participants in the general life of their new country. (107)

If some of the nouns were expressed as verbs, the majority community (who will more explicitly accept that helping minorities integrate is important) would be less burdened than the minorities (who will want to prepare to actively participate in general life in their new country). The level of verbosity and the non-material status of most actions seriously hinder the very understanding of the sentence and debilitate the validity of the proposition expressed.

Easier to read, but even more asymmetrical, is the following pair of sentences:

> There was a perception among a number of our Muslim witnesses of prejudice against Muslims in the job market. (. . .)

> However, other Muslim witnesses said that Muslims were creating difficulties for themselves. (124)

"Prejudice" in the first sentence is not only deprived of its carriers, it is also relegated to a mental space (there exists perception of prejudice), the environment of which is further restricted to a number of individuals. Though three examples follow the sentence, it is difficult not to see it as undermining their message. The second sentence, in contrast, shows clear attribution of agency in a material process and apportions the blame in an unambiguous way (Muslims themselves are to blame rather than the majority community). This way of describing members and non-members of a group is consistent with van Dijk's ideological square:

> Emphasise our good properties/actions

> Emphasise their bad properties/actions

> Mitigate our bad properties/actions

Mitigate their good properties/actions (1998:33)

By downplaying some of the less commendable activities or attitudes on the part of the majority community, nominalisations and passivisations work to preserve, as far as possible, the overall positive connotations of Britishness.

3. Lexical items
It is in the choice of vocabulary that those positive connotations of Britishness are most evident. A count of the collocates of "British" yields 83 occurrences, few of which recur. In four cases, "British Muslims" (26[7]), "British citizens" (6), "British society" (5), "British history" (3), "British geography" (1), the referent can be defined by ostension. Other relatively frequent collocates – "British agenda" (5), "British values" (2), "British beliefs" (2) and arguably "British identity" (5) – do not have fixed meanings. These can to some extent be supplied by analysing relations of equivalence and synonymy or hyponymy.

Near-synonymous expressions are "common national identity" (132); "what this society stands for" (105); and further: "tolerant and liberal democracy" (105); "democratic values" (103, 104, 115, 118); "democratic principles: (132); "traditional liberties" (117); "liberal traditions of the country" (118); opportunities for personal development [for women] (115); gender equality (127-8); keeping religion in the private sphere (117); integration (103-105); acceptability of multiple identities (115); in informant utterances: "opportunity to achieve [balance between identities]" (115); "having the freedom to decide what I do in life" (115); in the section concerned explicitly with defining a shared British agenda: "the rule of law and free speech"; "knowledge of our history and geography"; "the symbolism of the Mother of Parliaments"; "the [struggle to win] freedoms we enjoy today"; "the central role British history has played in the development of the principles modern democracies are

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[7]   In this paragraph the number in brackets denotes the frequency of the word rather than the page number.

governed by"; "celebrating Queen's birthday"; finally, the English language (132-133).

There are few explicit text antonyms: multiculturalism understood as fostering and overplaying difference, thus hindering integration (103, 133); "alien [non-democratic] political beliefs" (117); religious extremism (103, 133); racism (108, 127). Other factors working to the detriment of British values are practices present in the Muslim communities that do not accord with the Western way of life: forced marriages; the unequal access to citizen rights for women (104, 128); theocracy; strict Islamic law (105); as well as what could be called forces of modernity: "social liberalisation; decline in religious observance; continuing immigration" (132); finally, "devolution of power and its impact on England specifically" (132).

This set of data lends itself to the following comments.

Firstly, it is evident that (postulated) Britishness is seen as positively charged and desirable; this is achieved by a number of lexico-grammatical choices.

Secondly, many of the concepts that fill or define Britishness in informant utterances, especially those related to democracy, liberties, personal choice or opportunities for self-realisation, would not look out of place anywhere in the Western world. This non-specificity is consistent with Wodak et al's points on vagueness in articulating national identity (1999:36-40), though in the report it is acknowledged specifically on one occasion only. Instead, the UK's special status is presupposed and justified with recourse to its geography and history.

Thirdly, a trend evident in the negotiated meaning of Britishness is the downplaying of differentiating elements. One is religion, specifically Islam; placing religion in the public sphere is explicitly denoted un-British. Further, multiculturalism (interpreted as the overplaying of difference) is mentioned as one factor that adversely impacts on Britishness. The need for integration is stressed, but interestingly, the proposed basis for integration is "our shared past" (104), which is quite likely divisive given the history of British imperial presence in South Asia. Downplaying (intra-group) differences is also evident with respect to devolution of power. This

caused the English, "who for long barely distinguished between their Englishness and their British identity, to react" (132), presumably by rejecting Britishness in favour of Englishness. Devolution in its present form, which is to some extent constitutes an acknowledgment of intra-UK differences, is thus deemed unfavourable to a British identity; this, again, is consistent with Wodak et al.'s points on blurring intra-group distinctions in favour of an overarching group identity (1999:4).

Fourthly, if "[n]ational identity is a form of imaginative identification with the symbols and discourses of the nation-state" (Barker and Galasinski 2001:124), the text does offer some such symbols and posits such a ritual. One is the myth of the parliamentary tradition and of Britain / England as the birthplace of civic liberties. By way of ritual, Queen's birthday is proposed as a national holiday.

Fifthly, the performative aspect of identity is evident in some of the labels: there is a British agenda; Britishness is choosing - your identity; Britishness is participating – in the rituals: celebrating Queen's Birthday; knowing and re-telling the history. This points to a non-essentialist reading of Britishness, if only participation is not restricted.

Sixthly, both the foregrounded and implicit elements of British identity seem situated firmly within the vocabulary of individualistic free-market tradition of Capitalism, with freedom of enterprise evident amongst the many labels available. This is consistent with Conservative priorities in that respect. Further, the aspect of English / British history deemed particularly worthy of commemoration is the parliamentary and libertarian tradition, one cherished by Conservatives.[8] Although the need to introduce a wider than English perspective on history as taught in schools is acknowledged, notably absent is, among others, any mention of the welfare state. It thus appears that British identity in the interim report by the Conservative

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[8]   Lynch names the following as associated with British Conservatism: "individual liberty, tolerance, sincerity and the idea of the gentleman, property rights, permiamentary sovereignty and parochialism." (1999:3-4)

Policy Group on National and International Security largely overlaps with the values and priorities of the Conservative party.

4. Concluding remarks

Recommendations of the report, let alone the vision of British identity evident in it, were declared not to be binding for the Conservative leadership. Yet, some of its propositions were welcomed across the political spectrum[9]. This may have been because this Conservative voice is much different from that described by Smith (1994:105-110), confrontational, essentialist, characterised by covert, if not overt racism. Despite occasional tension in discourse, as with practices *less* rather than *in*compatible with Western ones, the report is explicitly open with respect to differences of religion or ethnicity. Residual metaphors of battle linger in this report, but the ranks are not as close as they used to be. Nor is the opponent the same: violent Islamists are denounced alongside and like the notoriously racist British National Party. Opportunities, choice and freedom of participation in the public sphere for women are explicitly stated as a condition of integration. What remains problematic, though explicable if one remembers that framing national identity is about drawing the lines, is the practical identification of Britishness with the Conservative agenda: this deems values not included in that agenda *non-* or at least *less* British.

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[9] In her column in *The Independent* on January 9, 2007, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (who long supported Labour, then Liberal Democrats) praises Cameron for making a "sophisticated and vital" intervention. The lead of the column reads: "Cameron's ideas on Britishness are so remarkable Labour would be foolish not to steal them." She then goes on to distance herself for his choice of historical high points or proposed rituals.

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