Conceptual models, discourses and political change.
'Britishness' in a social cognitive linguistics

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Cognitive Linguistics has demonstrated the applicability of a conceptual approach to the understanding of political issues, cf. Lakoff (2008), Musolff (2008), and many others. From another angle, critical discourse analysis has approached political concepts with a focus on specific issues such as race, class, gender and ethnic identity. Although discourses are not identical to conceptual models, in the typical case conceptual models are manifested in discourse, and discourses are reflections of conceptualizations, a theme explored e.g. in Hart and Lukes (2007).

As argued in Harder (2010), however, both the analytic stance of critical discourse analysis (based on the hermeneutics of suspicion), and the cognitivist stance of Lakoff (2008) are too narrow: The understanding of political language requires a wider framework of social cognitive linguistics. Essential features of such a framework are a basis in collaborative intersubjectivity and the inclusion of causal factors in the social domain that impinge on conceptualization. This enables politically salient conceptualizations to be understood in the light of different types of input to conceptualization, rather than in terms of conceptual models (or discourses) alone. This is especially important in cases that involve conflictive political issues such as national and ethnic identity.

This paper will report on a project launched by historians but with linguists as collaborators, which aims to throw light on the interplay between conceptual, political and military factors in shaping the ongoing change in the role and nature of 'Britishness'. One point of departure for the project is the widespread assumption that Great Britain is falling apart internally (cf. the planned referendum on Scottish independence) as a result of the loss of the global Empire. In seeking additional and alternative accounts of the current status of 'being British', the project aims to look at historical changes in the use of the concept 'British' and its interplay with political changes that go beyond conceptual and ideological development, including not only violent conflict and migration, but also measures that changed perceptions of what it means to be British, and of who see themselves as Britons. A central working hypothesis, put forward by Stuart Ward (the PI), is that a key factor is a change in the collective and intersubjective conception of being British (spurred on by various external changes). Areas studied will include the Falkland Islands, Scotland, and Africa.

Among the questions addressed will be: How powerful are conceptualizations and discourses in shaping political change? Under what circumstances does their power manifest itself? What are relations between conceptual models and external change in shaping the intersubjective status of Britishness? A crucial aim is to work towards a historically grounded, and as such panchronic answer to the question 'what does it mean to be British?', bringing together discursive, conceptual, military, political and demographic issues.

Keywords: social cognitive linguistics, conceptualization, discourse, identity, Britishness

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