

Conceptual models, discourses and political change

**‘Britishness’ in a social
cognitive linguistics**

Overview

- Conceptualization in social space
- National identity: social role and conceptual anatomy
- The cognitive and the social dimension of the family model
- The panchronic trajectory of Britishness
- Explaining the breakup of Britain?
- Summing up

Conceptualization in social space

- Conceptual models, like language itself, are extended in social space as well as in cognitive space
- Modelling ‘context’ as purely cognitive is problematic (pace eg Hart 2013, cf Maalej 2013:390)
- E.g., laws embody conceptualizations of certain acts as impermissible - but they also enter into social causality as grounds for enforcement
- Mapping such composite entities is a new challenge for cognitive linguistics – in trans-disciplinary collaboration with other fields (cf. *Meaning in Mind and Society*, Harder 2010)

Conceptualization in social space

- This paper reports on a history project with a linguistic dimension, *Embers of Empire* (PI Stuart Ward, Univ. of Copenhagen)
- The thesis is that 'Britishness' as a social-cognitive formation has a key role in the history (including the future) of Great Britain
- This contrasts with theories predicated solely on purely 'objective interests' or power play
- The specific focus is on factors that tend towards a 'break-up of Britain', cf. the vote on Scottish independence

Conceptualization in social space

- Concepts in social space have been intensively studied in critical theory and critical discourse analysis
- Such studies are mostly value-oriented and predicated on a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'
- A major aim is to deconstruct power-imbued models conveyed by discourses
- Cognitive Linguistics can add something that is missing in this account: the constitutive role of concepts and intersubjectivity in shaping social reality

National identity: social role and conceptual anatomy

- The role of conceptualization in underpinning nation states is generally recognized, cf. *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983)
- Imagination is necessary to extend the community size from face-to-face communities to geopolitical units
- This extension occurred as part of historical events in Europe around 1800, cf. Anderson

National identity: social role and conceptual anatomy

- The role of concepts in enabling the transition from tribal and feudal states to nations can be illustrated by a quote from the film *Lawrence of Arabia*:
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- T.E. Lawrence: We do not work this thing for Feisal.
- Auda abu Tayi: No? For the English, then?
- T.E. Lawrence: For the Arabs.
- Auda abu Tayi: The Arabs? The Howitat, Ajili, Rala, Beni Saha; these I know, I have even heard of the Harif, but the Arabs? What tribe is that?
- Unless there is a *concept* of ‘being Arabs’, a *real historical entity* constituted by “the Arabs” is inconceivable.
- But as modern Arab history shows, the concept in itself is not enough

National identity: social role and conceptual anatomy

- Two ***conceptual*** components:
- A 'classifying' component (citizenship in a given nation) – a 'plus/minus' property
- A 'descriptive' component (ethnocultural features of the community: a variational network of family resemblances, including 'family feeling')
- Two dimensions of ***grounding***:
- Intersubjective commitment (being eg Danish is part of who 'we' are)
- Emotional underpinning, cf. Damasio: it feels 'right' to take on this commitment

National identity: social role and conceptual anatomy

- National identity is different from nationalism (‘collective selfishness’)
- Historically, the collective commitment that underpins nations is also the underpinning of democracy
- Among the alternatives is a tribalism of interest groups, as found in ‘failed states’

The cognitive and the social dimension of the family model

- Embodied experience of family life constitutes a source domain for conceptualizing national life, cf. Lakoff (1995, 2008)
- Collective commitment and mutual obligations can be projected upwards from lived experience to social macro-structure
- This reflects the metaphorical directionality from concrete to abstract entities

The cognitive and the social dimension of the family model

- But the purely cognitive projection meets up with actual social structure
- The 'family projection' may be more or less plausible and more or less successful
- It may also be used for strategic purposes by power holders

The cognitive and the social dimension of the family model

- There are other family models than the nuclear 'parents-children' family
- Feudal and tribal universes conceive of family as lineage and kin
- (Post)modern family relations include extensions beyond blood relations
- The family projection itself is only part of the story

The cognitive and the social dimension of the family model

- Since an imaginative leap is necessary for nations to be viable, having a conceptualization that defines the community is of vital interest for governments
- This is a ***functional*** relation between conceptual models and social (historical) stability and change
- The functional relation does not depend on specific conceptual content

The panchronic trajectory of Britishness

- ' Being British ' is superimposed upon being English, Scottish, Welsh (and ' North Irish '), with England as the dominant component
- Hegemony can be understood as a social ' prototype effect ' :
- Just as you understand marginal instances of ' red ' via focal red, social identity takes the most powerful instantiation as its point of departure
- Being English was the prototypical/hegemonic way of being British

The panchronic trajectory of Britishness

- In the heyday of empire, a dominant conceptualization was 'family as lineage' ('blood', 'race', 'breed', 'kith and kin'), with the breed/race understood as the conquerors (*Rule, Britannia!*)
- Hitler made this conceptualization unacceptable
- Instead the 'mutually nurturing' family came into play (e.g. in George VI's Christmas messages) – including the conquered as well as the conquerors
- In 1948 all were recognized as British (with rights of abode in metropolitan Britain)

The panchronic trajectory of Britishness

- This conceptualization did not take hold, partly because of immigration issues
- In social-cognitive terms, no socially sustainable 'we' (with appropriate family feelings etc) could be *constructed* before the attempt was abandoned
- In 1962 Britishness was restricted to metropolitan Britain
- This reclassification left 'descriptive' Britishness hanging in the air

The panchronic trajectory of Britishness

- In the settler colonies the issue took the form of the debate on 'new nationalism': what is it to be Australian (or Canadian)?
- This is illustrative of the *functional* relation between conceived national identity and nations
- This was not really new *nationalism* (no intensified collective selfishness)
- It was a drive to fill a conceptual void in a functionally crucial social slot (with sometimes slightly farcical elements)

The panchronic trajectory of Britishness

- Loyalists like Diefenbaker (Canada) and Menzies (Australia) wanted to uphold Britishness as their national identity
- But with no classifying relation to a political unit, such a national identity is unsustainable – because there is no longer an operational 'we' in existence
- In terms of evolutionary dynamics, selection pressures will drive an unanchored identity out of existence

The panchronic trajectory of Britishness

- Because the erstwhile 'dominions' as geopolitical units were well-functioning, the identity panic gradually abated
- The 'classifying' bedrock could go on as a focus of loyalty even while the ethnocultural 'descriptive' side was undergoing reconstruction
- The stability of the classifying dimension explains why 'multiculturalism' is conceivable as a possible constituent of a national identity
- But it has to address the question of how to create a real, well-functioning (postmodern) national 'family' – a real 'we' out of ethnically different elements

The panchronic trajectory of Britishness

- The variability of the ‘descriptive’ conceptualizations of national identity also illustrates why models of national identity presented in official or political discourse are legitimate objects of deconstruction
- But criticizing all ‘us and them’ conceptualizations is not enough to create an operational national ‘we’ – if the real unit of identification is the ethnic group (cf. Malaysia as described in Eriksen & Stjernfelt 2012)
- Unless the social anchoring is part of the analysis, deconstruction is a purely intellectual exercise

Explaining the breakup of Britain

- If Scotland chooses independence, is that because Britain lost its Empire?
- In the account proposed here, this question can only be answered by asking first:
- What is the full story of 'Britishness' as a constituent in the social-cognitive universe?

Explaining the breakup of Britain

- Other nations have also lost empires, with varying consequences (not always fragmentation)
- Scotland provides a competing target for national identity (which has existed alongside the British identity, but may supersede it)
- In theory, Europe might constitute another alternative attractor
- The issue is: what are the factors that decide collective commitment to conceptual ('imagined') models of national identity, and thereby shape history?

Summing up

- Conceptual models exist in social as well as cognitive space
- National identity is a salient example
- It must be analysed not only through critical deconstruction, but also with a view to understanding its actual causal role(s)

Summing up

- The causal roles of national identity include not just fostering aggressive nationalism but also underpinning social cohesion and good governance
- This is reflected in the 'classifying' dimension of national identity: membership of a geopolitical unit
- Descriptive dimensions of national identity, including family models have both a basic conceptual dimension (as described by Lakoff) and a social-historical dimension with alternative anchorings in social conditions and discursive purposes – and both have a strong variational element

Summing up

- The story of Britishness illustrates how historical processes that involve complex combinations of cognitive and social dimensions can be understood through concepts from cognitive linguistics joining forces with analytic approaches from other disciplines

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