

On 'The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour'

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Abstract

*National identity, trapped within stereotypes and communicated via representations, holds secrets which are at once appealing and challenging. An insider's perspective on its inner core is more than welcome therefore. A perfect example in this respect is Kate Fox's **Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour** (2005), reviewed here to deconstruct a series of misconceptions about Englishness.*

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1. Stereotyping national identity

National identity is generally trapped within oversimplified, stereotypical formulations/representations which foreground self and other in essentialist, reductionist ways, carry obvious traces of apparently random prejudice, have the potential of inducing, at best, cultural misunderstanding and, at worst, intercultural dissent.

The Germans, for instance, are associated with craftsmanship, the Italians with music, the French with cuisine, the Spanish with dancing, the Romanians with hospitality, perhaps, and so on. As for the English, the set of cultural stereotypes which define them range from punctuality to five o'clock tea. All these are labels generally attached by outsiders and circulated world-wide. The enigmas of individual 'nesses', however, come to the surface and acquire meaning via insiders' views on things.

Some, like George Orwell, for instance, stress its individuality, with special emphasis on continuity, history, time and heritage – whereby one identifies with the community and the nation's evolution like one who looks at a photo of himself as a child and gathers that (s)he has nothing and everything in common with the image:

English culture [is] as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature (in Kermode 1973: 2142).

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Some others, like Julian Barnes, use fictional characters (Sir Jack Pitman, the businessman, in this particular case) to open the discussion on marketing, for a profit, the stereotypes already constructed, while also playing on yet another, implied stereotype: the condescending attitude of the English.

England is a nation of great age, great history, great accumulated wisdom. Social and cultural history – stacks of it, reams of it – eminently marketable. [...] Shakespeare, Queen Victoria, Industrial Revolution, gardening, that sort of thing. We are already what others may hope to become. We are the new pioneers. We must sell our past to other nations as their future (1998: 39-40).

The stereotypes resuming Englishness from within include not only “The Royal Family, Big Ben, The White Cliffs of Dover, Manchester United, BBC, West End, Beefeaters, London taxis, pubs, cricket” ... but also “warm beer, whingeing, bad teeth and not washing” (Barnes 1998: 83-85). Under the cover of declared or assumed fictionality, whether investigated by serious specialised analyses or subject to ironical self-descriptions, they address diverse audiences and serve a twofold purpose: of challenging their very formation and of avenging the outsider.

2. Under focus: *Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*

Kate Fox's *Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (2005) is a subversive book of anthropology – *cum* – social novel which plays with expectations, reveals some of the well-kept secrets of Englishness, attempting to arrange them neatly into a cultural ‘grammar’ and thus to make sense of the mix of disparate peculiarities associated to this insular nation.

It is structured into two parts, which place under the lens the best of the English worst. Part one, *Conversation codes*, develops on customs and rituals related to the weather, grooming-talk, humour rules, linguistic class codes, emerging talk-rules (the mobile phone) and pub-talk. Its most appealing section is dedicated to humour rules; here, emerging as laughable are the English themselves:

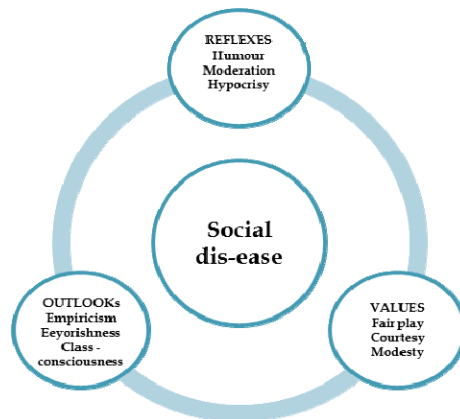
The understatement rule means that a debilitating and painful chronic illness must be described as ‘a bit of a nuisance’; a truly horrific experience is ‘well, not exactly what I would have chosen’; a sight of breathtaking beauty is ‘quite pretty’; an outstanding performance or

achievement is 'not bad'; an act of abominable cruelty is 'not very friendly', and an unforgivably stupid misjudgement is 'not very clever'; the Antarctic is 'rather cold' and the Sahara 'a bit too hot for my taste'; and any exceptionally delightful object, person or event, which in other cultures would warrant streams of superlatives, is pretty much covered by 'nice', or, if we wish to express more ardent approval, 'very nice'. (67)

Part two, *Behaviour codes*, looks into home rules, rules of the road, work to rule, rules of play, dress codes, food rules, rules of sex and rites of passage. In so doing, it gives an account of the culture and civilisation aspects which shed light on the complicated inner workings of English society in general and on the forces of inertia that propel each individual in particular, as quintessentially portrayed in the excerpt below:

We seem to be congenially incapable of being frank, clear or assertive. We are always oblique, always playing some complex, convoluted game. When we are not doing things backwards (saying the opposite of what we mean, not introducing ourselves until the end of an encounter, saying sorry when someone bumps into us), we are doing them sideways (addressing our indignant mutterings about queue-jumpers to other queuers). Every social situation is fraught with ambiguity, complication, hidden meanings, passive-aggression and paranoid confusion. We seem perversely determined to make everything as difficult as possible for ourselves. (173)

The overall diagram offered by Kate Fox to end her presentation holds at its centre the playful, self-deprecating coined term 'dis-ease', which sums up the sociological research, the narrative endeavour, the spirit of the language and the characteristics of the people.



The few positive traits arrived at and included in the diagram are grouped under 'values', to be read as 'goals' or 'aspirations' – pertaining to the future, always envisaged, never attained. The 'outlooks' practically foreground the basic flaws at the heart of Englishness: doubt, uncertainty, need for hard evidence (in empiricism); negativity, pessimism, gloominess (in cynicism) and the sense of hierarchy, acceptance of power structures (in class-consciousness). As for what appears under 'reflexes', no credit seems to be given to or, indeed, no blame appears to be cast on the English for their natural, inherited humour, modesty and hypocrisy.

The ratio between the pluses and the minuses (they, too, artificially constructed and forcefully imposed) which emerges from this careful weighing of the national identity mass indicates imperfection, hence qualifies as perfectly normal. Actually, both the findings and the process presupposed by the investigation carried out are honest, pleasant, intelligible and down to earth, holding up a mirror which reflects the business of everyday life, whose meanders and conundrums are easily recognisable by all, despite the localised distortions and deviations brought forth.

3. Concluding lines

Kate Fox's *Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* takes the reader on an incursion within the entanglements of the formation and transmission of cultural stereotypes which outline English identity. The neuralgic, yet highly significant intracultural and intercultural clashes signalled and dealt with humorously are the long awaited missing pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of Englishness assembled.

References

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