

Tony Jones / John Simpson

## **When does a stereotype become a prejudice? The UK perspective**

### **Abstract**

This short paper looks at how language use reflects national stereotypes both within the UK and more widely, and examines different types of positive and negative stereotypes that have in the past become embedded in the language. As England is the predominant nation demographically and economically within the UK, it is not surprising that it supplies the majority of the documentary examples of usage: though catalogued carefully in dictionaries, many usages are outmoded and/or derogatory and should be approached with caution by speakers of English whether native or non-native. The paper concludes with a summary of recent legislation in the UK against prejudice and notes similar efforts being made in the education system.

The examples provided were found in the media and elsewhere and are presented neutrally and for the benefit of the study of stereotypes and prejudice in language use. They are for the purposes of comparison only, and should not be represented as the opinions of the compilers of this report – which they are not.

Every country has a history, and that history necessarily involves its international relations. But although the public face of international relations consists of treaties, trade agreements, political alliances, and other high-level diplomatic associations, our international relations are also enshrined in our very language. Nationalism is a powerful force, and each country – and often different regions within a country – discloses its sense of international and national identity through its language. We adopt linguistic stereotypes to protect us, to bond with our fellow citizens, and to assert our nationalism.

In terms of linguistic stereotypes, we most often caricature our near neighbours. Historically, and especially before the age of mass communication, these are the people with whom we have most contact. Neighbours are not us: they have different customs, and the way they manifest their lifestyle and aspirations traditionally offers scope for the formulation of stereotypes. These stereotypes are not aggressive or dismissive, but are just our way of coping with difference. Stereotypes change over time as we change, and as our international and national relationships change. What is a conventional stereotype in one century may give a false impression in a new reality.

There are dangers in stereotypes, of course. Language changes slowly, and what was acceptable in the nineteenth century may no longer be socially acceptable in the twentieth or twenty-first. We erode false stereotypes, but slowly. They hang over into the new reality, and often embarrassingly so. The principal danger of stereotypes occurs when they turn into prejudice, which can then become a social disease. In the twenty-first century, societies have in general become much more alert to the dangers of prejudice, and its eradication is a watchword of most societies. But again it can be a slow business. Prejudice cannot be dismissed by political edict, and only gradually by social engineering. Societies need to change before prejudice can be eradicated.

This paper looks at words and expressions which have been used in the UK, and particularly in England, in the past to stereotype those in other countries. They give us an insight not only into international relations, but into the psyche of the English – the good and the bad. The examples given here are found in the media and elsewhere, and are presented neutrally and for the benefit of the study of stereotypes and prejudice. They are presented for the purposes of comparison and scholarly research, and should not be represented as the opinions of the compilers of this report – which they are not. The tendency nowadays to decry stereotypes as prejudice-by-stealth is widespread, and is as prevalent in the UK today as it is in other countries. But we benefit from an awareness of the situation in the past, as it helps us come to terms with the modern reality.

Each section below started life as a response to a questionnaire circulated to members within EFNIL. We have tried to retain the original structure of the questionnaire, whilst attempting to integrate the responses and commentary naturally into the flow of the article. We conclude with some general remarks on stereotypes and prejudice not just in the UK but throughout Europe and elsewhere.

## 1. Beliefs and opinions concerning neighbouring countries

Generally, stereotypes show that countries neighbouring England have both positive and negative profiles: the positive ones typically involve flair and creativity in language and song. Countries slightly further away geographically (and hence less familiar to speakers and writers) are stereotyped by apparent characteristics taken to an extreme, but again literary and musical features can be admired.

Fortunately national stereotypes are much less common in the media than they were twenty years ago, and can attract accusations of racism.

In expressions relating to *Scotland*, the country is felt to be beautiful (*bonny Scotland*) and yet also be distant and remote, with a wild landscape; the English find some customs strange and unfamiliar (e.g. haggis, kilts, and bagpipes).

While only part of the whole island of *Ireland* is in the UK, cultural stereotypes typically pre-date the division of the country into the Republic of Ireland

and Northern Ireland. Ireland is the most stereotyped of the countries immediately adjacent to England – different, admirable, and yet puzzling. The self-designation “the Emerald Isle” typifies Irish dreaming. Ireland is regarded as being a beautiful country, with an attractive ancient Celtic heritage. Some outmoded expressions, now known principally from dictionaries, relating specifically to the country, rather than to the people, include *Irish bull* (= “nonsense”), *Irish hubbub* (= “uproar”), *Irish mile* (“a long distance”). Much of the cultural stereotyping of Ireland and the Irish can be traced to nineteenth-century discourse. Hollywood/ Broadway added to this process in the twentieth century, ignoring modern Ireland while attempting to preserve an idealised emigrant vision of the old country.

Wales is typically and endearingly regarded as a country populated more by sheep ranging the hills and valleys than by people. It is characterised by its beautiful scenery, with a strong culture of singing and passion, especially for rugby-playing. It may be seen as remote and hilly, and also by being badly affected by the loss of industry (especially coal). Expressions recorded include: *Welsh comb* (“the fingers”), *Welsh mile* (“something, esp. a distance, that feels long and tedious”).

France has long been criticised and admired by England and the English. An old name, *Frogland*, possibly derives from the frog-like shape of the ‘*fleur de lys*’ on French royal banners and not from the (relatively rare) habit of eating ‘*les cuisses de grenouilles*’. France is admired for its creative flair in sport, but is sometimes stereotyped by the British media as inefficient in business, insular or over-nationalistic. Dictionary expressions include: *French disease* (etc.) = “venereal disease, esp. syphilis”; sexual expressions (*French kiss*, etc.); *French cricket* (an informal, children’s form of the game); *French letter* (“condom”). Needless to say the French language contains similar expressions: *le vice anglais* (homosexuality); *la capote anglaise* (condom); *filer à l’anglais* (to take French leave = “unpermitted absence”).

Germany is allotted characteristics of efficiency, impersonality, in business and sport – of a type that the English might aspire to if they overcame their natural politeness and diffidence. Archaic dictionary expression: *German gold* (= “imitation gold leaf”).

## 2. Stereotyping of citizens of neighbouring countries

Nicknames for *Scots* include *Jock*, *Scotty* (usually familiar rather than antagonistic). Scots may be regarded as disliking spending money – some resentment and mistrust between Scotland and England has arisen from present and historical political events, e.g. during and after the recent devolution referendum. Positive traits – the Scots are generally regarded as canny (shrewd), dependable, resilient. The words ‘Scotland’, ‘Scottish’ are used as positive attributes in the UK financial and insurance sectors (e.g. Bank of Scotland, Scottish Widows).

Nicknames for the *Irish* include *Mac*, *Paddy*, *West Briton* (historical), *Pat*, *Mick*. The Irish are variously regarded as characteristically musical and fun-loving, and as very friendly and helpful. Other perceived traits: gregarious, witty, literary, lucky; see, for example, *the luck of the Irish*.

Nicknames for the *Welsh* (typically familiar and friendly) include *Taffy*, *leek*, *Taff*, *Welsh wizard* 'nickname given to any talented or celebrated Welsh person'. General attributes are both positive and negative: the Welsh are variously regarded as being kindly, ineffectual, or long-winded. Further perceived traits: musical, poetic, passionate.

Phrases and nicknames for the *French* include *Frenchy*, *frog*, *frog-eater*, *froggy*, *parleyvo*. The French have been generally regarded as inimical to the English, and generally distrustful of foreigners. A general survey of national attitudes may be found here: [www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/26/french-stereotypes-arrogant-good-in-bed](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/26/french-stereotypes-arrogant-good-in-bed).

Phrases and nicknames for *Germans* (generally negative or neutral) include: *Fritz*, *Jerry*, *sausage-eater*, *kraut*. Some opinions, especially among the older generation, are still coloured by WWII: Germans are regarded as highly efficient, rather impersonal, and yet supremely technologically competent. A general survey of national attitudes may be found here: [www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/26/german-stereotypes-dont-mention-towels](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/26/german-stereotypes-dont-mention-towels).

### 3. Opinions concerning languages of neighbouring countries

The English generally are considered to be poor learners of other languages, and this doubtless influences their view of other tongues. This is partly because they have no land borders with continental Europe, and so are less familiar with the styles of multicultural interchange common within much of mainland Europe. In addition, the proportion of students (both in school and university) electing to study modern foreign languages for examination has been falling in recent years, and the school syllabuses tend to reduce the period over which modern foreign languages must be learnt.

In *Scotland*, Edinburgh is regarded as having a polite, refined accent; Glasgow is perceived as possessing a more industrialised, urban accent. Generally, the English regard Lowland Scots as a variety of English, even though some scholars now regard Scots as a separate language within the West Germanic group. Scots Gaelic is not well known to the English.

In *Ireland*, the language is admired for the beautiful accent (even though many regional accents exist within Ireland itself), and for the songs and literature in Irish Gaelic and Irish English.

The *Welsh* language is regarded as sweet (lilting, smooth), but complex.

The *French* are regarded as poor speakers of English and sometimes intolerant of foreigners speaking poor French. The French language can be regarded as unintelligible, or as a beautiful, poetic tongue.

The *German* language is sometimes perceived to be harsh and guttural, with many long words. Despite the high prestige in England of German literature and poetry in the nineteenth century, it is now less highly regarded.

#### **4. How the English see themselves**

England is regarded as proudly independent (or – negatively – insular) in the profile it presents to the world. It is perceived to be less powerful globally than it has been in the past, but it is popular with immigrants from within and outside the EU because of its prestige culture (a feature it shares with the USA), and for what is regarded as its generous benefit system. However, many of its major institutions and cultural identifiers have been acquired by companies based in other countries (EDF, etc.) or are in the process of coming under foreign control, leaving worries about the independence of its underfunded infrastructure. Its historical parliamentary system, its football, and various other features are still regarded commonly as world-beating. It suffers from a north/south economic divide, an urban/rural divide, a public/private education divide.

A general summary of national attitudes may be found here: [www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/26/british-stereotypes-please-mention-war](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/26/british-stereotypes-please-mention-war).

Different regional groups are separately characterised, and fiercely supported in their own region, while being ridiculed by others.

English is variously the pride of the world (the language of Shakespeare), difficult to use well as spelling is irregular and increasingly unrelated to pronunciation; the preposition/adverb system is opaque; there is tension between reformers (simplifiers) and traditionalists.

Goidelic and Brittonic languages are not taught in the English educational system, but Welsh as a subject is compulsory in Welsh state schools at Key Stage 4 (15-16-year-olds). Approximately 25% of schoolchildren in the principality receive Welsh-medium education. As the English are uncomfortable learning foreign languages, they tend to prefer to learn those neighbouring and European languages which are regarded as “easier” to learn: Spanish, then French, before German – which is less popular.

#### **5. Measures or projects to cope with prejudices in the UK**

The UK’s Equality Act of 2010 covers England and Wales, with legislation for Northern Ireland provided locally. Scotland likewise has its own legislation. With this Act of Parliament in place the legal climate recognises that people can cause

or take offence because of ethnicity issues and provides redress for victims experiencing racism. As a result, racism – including casual racism (e.g. in so-called ‘banter’) – is increasingly less acceptable. Many for-profit organisations are instigating unconscious-bias training to help mitigate prejudice or any affinity bias they may have. Other organisations have taken this step too in addition to general awareness-raising programmes to help reduce prejudice and to support inclusion. The UK education system, through curriculum, policies and practices is actively tackling (with the aim of ultimately eradicating) racism and promoting inclusion.

## **6. Conclusion**

This examination of stereotypical expressions that have been used of neighbouring countries in the UK and elsewhere highlights perceived difference of culture, sometimes – for effect and reinforcement – taken to extremes. The examination also shows that the level of stereotypical description today is considerably lower than in previous centuries, in keeping with a general notion in societies that as stereotypes can lead to prejudice, they are best avoided. The situation cannot be controlled, but social changes have led to an overall diminution of stereotypical expressions for other nationalities, and an increase in the celebration rather than the castigation of difference. Discussions within the conference indicated that there was a widespread sense that stereotypes would, at least at some background level, be preserved and were a necessary by-product of expressions of nationalism, but that overt prejudice, leading to racism, sexism, and other extreme positions, should be and actually was on a sharp decline. Some countries within Europe hope to control or balance stereotypical language by influencing social change, whereas others have a more *laissez-faire* attitude. But overall, the wave of attitudinal shift currently in evidence in societies, whether state-engineered or the result of natural adjustments, was regarded as a positive sign for the weakening of national stereotypes and the reduction of social and institutional prejudice in the future.

**Bibliographical information**

This text was first published in the book:

Anna Dąbrowska/Walery Pisarek/Gerhard Stickel (eds.) (2017): Stereotypes and linguistic prejudices in Europe. Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2016 in Warsaw. Budapest: Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [ISBN 978-963-9074-68-2. 280 pages.]

The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>