

**Deborah Cameron**  
University of Oxford

**THE ONE, THE MANY  
AND THE OTHER:  
REPRESENTING MULTI-  
AND MONO-LINGUALISM  
IN POST-9/11 VERBAL HYGIENE**

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**Abstract:**

This paper argues that 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain has seen an unprecedented rise in English-only sentiment, predicated on de-ethnicized post-multicultural discourses of “community cohesion.” Whereas 20<sup>th</sup>-century verbal hygiene and other forms of linguistic prescriptivism in the UK had been relatively indifferent to multilingualism and how it was expressed, speakers of Arabic and other UK-based non-anglophone languages have recently taken on the symbolic status of “folk devils” in British society, though most convicted perpetrators of terrorism, such as in the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005 are proficient speakers of English, and sometimes themselves monolinguals. Cameron expands in this essay on her 1995 concept of “verbal hygiene” to include linguistic landscapes ranging from Welsh, Polish, and Bengali to English, Arabic, and Mandarin.

**Keywords:**

9/11 ♦ monolingualism ♦ terror ♦ Arabic ♦ verbal hygiene ♦ language policy ♦ education citizenship ♦ naturalization

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The subject of this paper is not the empirical reality of communication in one or many languages, but the representation of monolingualism and multilingualism in contemporary political discourse. My focus on representations of language, or what linguistic anthropologists call “language ideologies” (see e.g. Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998), is of course nothing new in discussions of mono- and multilingualism. Nor is the idea that these are fundamentally discursive constructs, as opposed to just labels for pre-discursive realities. But old discourses can be turned to new ideological purposes, and in this paper I examine a case in point: the way discourses on multi- and monolingualism have been recruited to address the political problems and the cultural anxieties which have risen to prominence since the events of 9/11 and the onset of the so-called “war on terror.”

Though I will take my examples mainly from discourse produced in my own society, Britain, the kind of discourse I consider is not found only in Britain: in broad outline if not in fine detail, the analysis offered here will be relevant to the discourse produced in other (especially western) societies. The conceptual framework for that analysis is drawn from my earlier work on verbal hygiene (Cameron 1995). Since readers may be unfamiliar with that work—and indeed with the term “verbal hygiene”—I will begin with some observations on the concept of verbal hygiene and its relevance to the analysis that follows.

### **Verbal Hygiene**

The term verbal hygiene refers to all the normative metalinguistic practices through which people attempt to improve languages or regulate their use. Practices here should be understood to include the production of discourse on linguistic matters, where that discourse is intended to serve a “hygienic” purpose. For example, copyediting text in accordance with a style guide is a verbal hygiene practice; the style guide itself is an example of verbal hygiene discourse. The producer of the guide engages in verbal hygiene by codifying the norms of “good” or “correct” style, while the copy editor engages in verbal hygiene by applying or enforcing the norms.

Though the discourses and practices which satisfy the definition just outlined are, in the general sense, prescriptive, verbal hygiene is not a synonym for prescriptivism in the sense that term is used by linguists, i.e. the promotion of “correct” or standard usage. That is certainly one category of verbal hygiene, but

the latter term is meant to draw attention to the existence of a larger and more varied set of normative linguistic practices. Verbal hygiene is centrally about evaluating language, making judgments on whether it is “good” or “bad” and how it could or should be improved. But people’s judgments and their values vary widely, and in consequence so do the verbal hygiene practices based on them. Prescriptivism, for instance, accords most value to ‘correctness’; other kinds of verbal hygiene, by contrast, may accord more value to authenticity, beauty, creativity, truth, efficiency, equality, logic, clarity or civility. Politically, prescriptivism tends to be conservative and elitist; other forms of verbal hygiene may be the opposite. Supporters of “politically correct” terminology champion innovative over established usage; campaigners for plain English are motivated by opposition to elitism. Although PC and plain language movements are not usually treated as prototypical examples of “prescriptivism,” they are clearly instances of verbal hygiene, in that they both seek to regulate language-use in accordance with particular values. And it is of course the evaluative dimension of verbal hygiene which makes many or most instances of it contentious: those who oppose a particular practice most often do so because they dissent from or disapprove of the values it affirms.

The examples I have given illustrate one further, crucial point. In any given time and place, the forms of verbal hygiene, which are most salient, and which provoke most debate, will tend to be linked to other preoccupations which are not primarily linguistic, but rather social, political and moral. The logic behind verbal hygiene depends on a tacit, common-sense analogy between the order of language and the larger social order; the rules or norms of language stand in for the rules governing social or moral conduct, and putting language to rights becomes a symbolic way of putting the world to rights. That is why so many debates about apparently small and trivial linguistic points are engaged in with such extraordinary moral fervour. If we recognize that verbal hygiene is a coded discourse, in which linguistic concerns function as surrogates for other, less tangible or less readily expressible concerns, it becomes possible to interpret what might look like an arbitrary or trivial complaint as a symbolic expression of deep desires and fears.

For the analyst of verbal hygiene, then, any upsurge of concern about some aspect of language must always prompt the questions: what underlying social/political anxieties might this overt concern about language be covertly symbolizing? And what ideological work does that symbolism do? In addressing

those questions, however, it is important to recognize that verbal hygiene is a response to the anxieties of a specific moment: it cannot be assumed that the same linguistic preoccupation will have the same symbolic meaning in every time and place.

We might consider, for example, current concerns about endangered languages, which are clearly linked to deeper anxieties about the future of the planet and the loss of cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world (e.g. Nettle and Romaine 2004; for a critical interpretation see also Duchêne and Heller 2007). At other historical moments, by contrast, the desire to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity has been linked to very different ideological commitments. The Nazis were ardent language preservationists: they championed the rights of the Celtic-speaking minorities in Britain and France, and worried, we might think presciently, about the future dominance of English over other languages. But this position, which we would now be inclined to think of as politically progressive, was shaped in the Nazi case by the language ideology Christopher Hutton (1999) labels “mother tongue fascism.” The linguists of the Third Reich asserted the primacy of the mother tongue on the grounds that it expressed the essential racial character of the group that spoke it natively. If one race adopted another’s language, they would not only be expressing themselves in an alien medium, but also corrupting the racial purity of the language they adopted. This idea featured prominently in the anti-semitic discourse of the Nazi era. The Jews of Europe were said to have a father tongue, Hebrew, but no mother tongue; they were accused of illegitimately appropriating other languages, and in the process polluting them.

I offer this example not to accuse today’s language preservationists of fascism, which would be inaccurate as well as offensive, but on the contrary, to underline the point that any instance of verbal hygiene must be interpreted in relation to the specific historical and social context in which it arises. Established discourses on language are continually recruited to address new social and political anxieties, and in the process they may be inflected with new meanings.

In the following discussion I will trace the way in which established discourses on mono- and multilingualism have been incorporated into verbal hygiene discourses prompted by the political anxieties of the post-9/11 era; I will also ask how and to what extent that incorporation has reinflected their meanings. As I noted above, most of the discourse I will examine comes from post-9/11 Britain.

In line with the principle that verbal hygiene must be interpreted in relation to its historical and social context, I will begin by (selectively) considering the state of discourse on mono- and multilingualism in Britain before 9/11, and how that discourse was shaped by the social and historical particularities of the British case.

### **English and Britishness: From Apathy to Anxiety**

Verbal hygiene discourses which treat monolingualism as an ideal and multilingualism as a problem have a relatively long history, which can be related to the history of the nation-state as a political entity. Allegiance to a single language, identified with a particular place and the cultural traditions of that place, has been a powerful symbol both of what unites the “imagined community” of the nation (Anderson 1991), and of what distinguishes it from other nations. It stands in other words for both identity and difference, and historically these have prototypically been imagined in terms of ethnicity. Even today in parts of Europe, especially though not only post-Soviet Europe, it is possible to observe verbal hygiene practices expressing traditional ethnolinguistic nationalism—one people, one language, one nation—in a relatively pure form.

In Britain, however, that particular form of verbal hygiene has had rather little purchase on the popular imagination, at least in relation to the majority language, English. The Celtic languages that were displaced after the imposition of English rule on Wales, Scotland and Ireland (the north of which remains part of the modern UK) are another matter: Welsh in particular is an important symbolic reference point for nationalist discourses. But for the English monolinguals who form the majority of the native British population, English has less resonance as a symbol of national identity, and its status relative to other languages has not until recently been a matter of much concern.

One possible explanation for this apparent lack of concern might be, of course, that there is no actual threat to the status of English as the dominant language of Britain. (It is also the dominant language of numerous other nation-states, and the world’s most important lingua franca—that international currency may contribute to its relative marginality as a symbol of English or British national identity.) But the threats that verbal hygiene symbolically addresses are often imagined rather than real; and there are other majority anglophone countries

where this particular imagined threat looms far larger—most notably, of course, the USA. If the US and Britain have followed different trajectories with regard to this issue, that must reflect considerations other than the actual level of the threat other languages pose to English (which is negligible in both cases).

One such consideration might be differences in what social divisions and conflicts are perceived as most threatening in the two societies. Although it is something of an over-simplification, it would not be completely inaccurate to suggest that in Britain, the anxieties about disunity and social conflict that are symbolically expressed in verbal hygiene discourse have focused most persistently on divisions of social class (see e.g. Crowley 2003), whereas in the US for obvious historical reasons, more anxiety has tended to focus on racial and ethnic divisions (see e.g. Lippi-Green 2012). As already noted, debates on mono- and multilingualism are typically linked to questions of ethnic and national identity. The greater salience of ethnic divisions in the US might explain why there has been more overt political conflict about multilingualism there.

But that cannot be the whole explanation, since it is not the case that Britain has been free from political conflict around racial and ethnic divisions, nor that there is no prejudice against speakers of languages other than English. The point is rather that organized political racism (as opposed to the more everyday, casual kind) has not on the whole been manifested in racist campaigns of verbal hygiene. For instance, nothing comparable to the US 'English Only' movement has ever developed; no laws restrict the use of minority languages in public space, or prevent local authorities from providing services in them; as recently as 2004 there was no language requirement for UK citizenship. On the political Right, even more than the Left, state interference in matters of language has been viewed as incompatible with the traditions of the nation that produced Magna Carta. In 2001, when a Labour politician made a speech urging British Asians to use only English to their children at home, he was rebuked by a Conservative opponent for flouting the principle that "an Englishman's home is his castle." (Similarly, the idea of a French-style ban on the full-face veils worn by some Muslim women was recently described by one Conservative minister as "un-British.")

But whatever may account for the relatively low level of concern about multilingualism that characterized Britain in the past, it is clear that there has recently been a sea-change. Today, discourse on the status of English and the

presence of other languages in Britain is ubiquitous, and the anxiety is being voiced most insistently not by racist fringe parties or the popular tabloid press, but by the UK government itself. It is evidently an anxiety which crosses party lines: official expressions of it began to appear during the period when the Labour Party was in power, and they have continued to be produced under the current government, a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. In the space of less than a decade, the UK has gone from being a country with virtually no language policy—no official language, no language requirement for immigration or citizenship or voting—to being a country where every week brings forth some new regulation or official pronouncement on the importance of everyone speaking English and only English.

One landmark event in the process just described was the introduction, in 2005, of a test for British citizenship applicants. Blandly entitled “Life in the UK,” the test directly assesses the candidate’s knowledge of British history, social customs and political institutions. But indirectly it is also a language test, since it has to be taken in a “recognized British language.” Overwhelmingly, that means it is taken in English: though someone resident in Wales or Scotland would be entitled to take it in Welsh or Gaelic, this has not happened often enough to be recorded in official government statistics. Statistics are, however, available on the pass rates for applicants from different countries, and those figures are instructive: they suggest that the language-testing element of “Life in the UK” fulfils a significant gate-keeping function, advantaging native speakers (especially those of white European ancestry) relative to applicants who have English as a second or additional language. In 2009 (the most recent year for which full statistics were available at the time of writing), US citizens, Canadians and Australians had pass rates of over 95%; for applicants from post-colonial Commonwealth countries like India the figure was around 80%; for those from China it was approximately 65%, and for those from Iraq and Afghanistan it was under 50% (see BBC News 2010).

Of course, many people live or even settle permanently in Britain without becoming or wishing to become citizens. But proficiency in English is increasingly being demanded as a condition of entry for non-citizens too. Anyone who wishes to live and work in Britain, and who comes from outside the European Union, must now demonstrate a knowledge of English before the UK border agency will admit them—even if they have another basis on which to claim entry, such as being married to a British citizen.

For those who are educated in Britain, whether native or foreign-born, mere proficiency in English is not enough to satisfy the government. In March 2012, the Conservative politician Eric Pickles made a speech in which he declared that every British school-leaver should be able to “speak English like a native.” Those who failed to reach that goal, he said, risked making themselves an unemployable sub-class. That he felt able to make this comment in the middle of a recession, when something like 20% of all Britons between the ages of 18 and 25 are unemployed, tells us how far this demonization of the non-English speaker has become normalized in British political discourse.

What is driving the demonization? Here we must return to the more general issue of the relationship between language and national identity/unity. I noted earlier that “classic” ethnolinguistic nationalism still survives in some parts of the world; but in many places during recent decades, the developments we refer to in shorthand using the term “globalization”—in this context most saliently the increased transnational mobility of workers and the mass migration of people from poorer to more affluent regions of the world—have disrupted the traditional links among language, place, ethnicity and nationality.

As national populations become more ethnically diverse, and as many nations increasingly depend on the labour of migrants who will not settle permanently, there is an anxiety that in a culturally and ethnically non-homogeneous society there will be inter-group conflict and social disorder. One way in which that fear is expressed is through verbal hygiene. The linguistic analogue of heterogeneity—multilingualism—becomes a symbolic touchstone in discourse about the threat migration poses to national unity; there are demands for incomers to make more effort to learn and use the national language, and in some cases for punitive measures to enforce its use. That these demands fulfil a primarily symbolic function is suggested by the observation that where migrants are alleged not to be learning the language, this is almost never a response to actual evidence of widespread failure to reach acceptable levels of proficiency. Concern is more likely to be voiced at moments when the spotlight has been turned on immigration for other reasons.

In Britain this point has recently been dramatized by the results of the last national census, carried out in 2011. The census form (which everyone resident in the UK on the relevant date is legally obliged to complete) included not only an item requiring respondents to indicate the main language used in their



household, but also, for those who named a language other than English, a further item requiring them to report whether they spoke English “very well, well, not well or not at all.” In December 2012 the Office for National Statistics released its first findings from these data. Analysis showed that 92.3% of respondents had named English as their main language; of those who had not, the vast majority described themselves as speaking English “well” or “very well,” with only 0.3% of UK residents over the age of three reporting that they did not speak English (for a summary of the data see Office for National Statistics 2013). Yet in media coverage this statistic was almost universally ignored, in favour of stories about Polish becoming the UK’s second language. Only a few weeks earlier there had been a series of high-profile speeches on immigration by politicians including the leader of the opposition Labour Party, Ed Miliband, who promised that a future Labour government’s social integration policy would “start with language,” and that he would introduce measures such as an English proficiency requirement for any public sector worker whose job required them to speak to members of the public. The government’s own statistics make clear that the problem that has loomed so large in political rhetoric for the past decade is actually a negligible one, affecting far fewer people than you might expect in a country characterized by such high levels of immigration (except of course that the UK is an attractive destination for economic migrants partly because so many of them already have some proficiency in its majority language). That politicians continue to present it as a major and growing problem just reinforces the suspicion that language as such is not the issue: “they should learn the language” is a symbolic shorthand for “they should display their willingness to assimilate.” The perceived threat is otherness itself, and language is a privileged symbol of that.

In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, the kind of anti-immigrant verbal hygiene discourse just described has become increasingly common over the last decade. The migrant who cannot speak the local language, or who refuses to learn it, has featured recurrently as the “folk devil” (Cohen 1987) in an ongoing moral panic about immigration. He or she is represented as a social parasite, a cynical freeloader who consumes the host country’s resources without contributing to its economy. Ironically, this description patently fails to fit some of the most resented groups of recent immigrants to Britain, namely Poles and other eastern Europeans, who are typically young, educated, gainfully employed, and highly proficient in English. Where there is resentment towards them, its real cause is

economic: in some places they are competing with British workers for scarce resources like housing and school places, and in some employment sectors their willingness to work long hours for low pay is perceived to be driving down wages. Language has nothing at all to do with this, but resentment is often expressed in, for instance, complaints about shops allegedly “excluding” British natives by displaying signs in Polish or advertising for workers who can serve customers in Polish (e.g. “Shopkeeper Upsets Jobseekers by Demanding Polish Language Skills” 2012).

But the current hostility to immigration is not based only on economic considerations. It is also connected to the reshaping of the cultural and ideological landscape which has taken place in the past decade, precipitated by the 9/11 attacks and the chain of events that followed. These events have provoked anxiety about the threat posed, not simply by immigration as such but more specifically by certain kinds of immigrants, to the security and the values of western democracies. The increasingly assiduous policing of national borders is one response to that perceived threat—the threat of terrorism and of radical Islam.

### **Britishness, “Cohesion” and the Enemy Within**

In Britain the war on terror is not just a war on immigrants: it focuses at least as intensely on the internal threat represented by the influence of radical Islam on young men growing up in Britain’s established Muslim communities. Concern about this issue escalated significantly in 2005, when Britain experienced its own smaller-scale version of 9/11, often referred to as “7/7” because it took place on the 7th of July. Four young Muslim men, all British, travelled to London from the towns where they lived carrying home-made explosive devices which they proceeded to detonate on three underground trains and one bus, killing themselves and more than 50 other people. This provoked a wave of anxiety about the problem of the so-called “home-grown terrorist”—prototypically imagined as a young man of Pakistani ancestry but born and raised in Britain, whose failure to integrate into British society has made him vulnerable to being radicalized by extremists. Preventing this radicalization became part of the mission of a new government department set up in 2006 with the title Department for Communities and Local Government, and headed by a Secretary of State for Communities (currently Eric “speak English like a native” Pickles).

An important part of the Department's remit is promoting what is referred to as "community cohesion." In practice, what this has turned out to involve is a concerted effort to discredit multiculturalism (which was described in a 2008 report on security as making Britain "a soft touch for terrorists" (see "Multiculturalism is making Britain 'a soft touch for terrorists'" 2006) and replace it with an overtly assimilationist agenda. Language emerged early on as a major theme in this campaign. On one level the message was straightforward and uncontroversial: to participate fully in British society, minority ethnic groups must master the majority language. I call this uncontroversial because no one in any community had ever seriously disputed it. Its sudden emergence as a recurring motif in political discourse was not prompted by any evidence of real-world resistance to learning English on the part of minority speakers. Arguably it was prompted more by the political need to find compelling symbolic correlates for the dry and abstract term "cohesion"—and also for the much-debated idea of "Britishness," attempts to define which often became bogged down in an unsatisfactory mixture of general principles with no distinctively British content (e.g. belief in democracy and the rule of law) and trivial minutiae (e.g. talking about the weather and forming orderly queues). Language offered a solution to this coding problem: monolingualism and multilingualism were pressed into service as the metaphorical correlates, respectively, of social cohesion and social fragmentation, while speaking English became one of the marks of Britishness.

This code has been used extensively by politicians, who clearly assume that those they address will use their understanding of it to interpret utterances which would otherwise be difficult to make sense of. For example, in 2008 the Labour politician Hazel Blears, who was then the Communities Secretary, urged local councils to stop translating so many official documents into minority community languages. Instead, she suggested, they should "think very carefully about how you can bring people together." At a literal level it is hard to find any logical connection between the two propositions "you should stop translating documents from English" and "you should bring people together." How does putting the same English-language leaflet through every citizen's door "bring people together"? If some citizens are unable to read English, why is declining to provide material in any other language an inclusive as opposed to an exclusionary gesture? Translation itself might be thought of as a way to "bring people together," since it gives them access to the same texts even when they do not share a common language. But by the time Blears made her remarks, the

metaphorical equation of many languages with division and fragmentation had already been extended to the obviously multilingual and allegedly multiculturalist practice of translation, which was said to contribute to the ghettoizing of minorities by depriving them of incentives to acquire or improve their English. The image of the same text rendered in a series of different languages and scripts had become a powerful symbol of ethnic and religious fragmentation, a stark reminder of difference and otherness which needed to be erased in the interests of “cohesion.”

But the attack on translation, which has continued since 2008, is by no means the most illogical element in the discourse which represents English monolingualism as a defence against fragmentation and the extremism it allegedly encourages. What much of this discourse unaccountably overlooks is that the “home-grown terrorist,” whose spectacular emergence in 2005 propelled the issue of “cohesion” to the top of the political agenda, is himself most often a native speaker of English, and not infrequently a monolingual one. That point was dramatized shortly after 7/7, when martyrdom videos made by two of the bombers were retrieved and then broadcast by the media. No subtitles were required: the language in which these young men explained their political philosophy and said goodbye to their loved ones was not Arabic, Urdu or Punjabi, it was English spoken with a local (Yorkshire) accent.

Interviewed for a BBC documentary, *The Secret War on Terror*, on the events of 7/7, which aired on August 31, 2011, one survivor of the attacks said that she found the bomber’s Yorkshire accent the most “chilling” feature of the video. This might seem a strange remark given the actual content of the text in question. But the idea that there is something particularly disturbing about the use of a regional English variety as the medium for an Islamic terrorist’s martyrdom video has a certain symbolic logic. In the discourse I have been discussing so far, the key opposition is between cohesion, symbolized by English monolingualism, and fragmentation, associated with the maintenance of other languages: fragmentation is figured as a threat, but the nature or source of the threat is only vaguely evoked using generic terms like “extremism” and “radicalization.” There is a second discourse to be considered, however, in which the code is less opaque: language becomes more clearly a metaphor for the so-called “clash of civilizations,” and the central opposition is between English and Islam.

## English and its Others

This second discourse, which is not specifically British, is touched on in a brief but thought-provoking article by the applied linguist Sohail Karmani (2005), which focuses on the way English language teaching has been used by governments as a weapon in the war on terror. Karmani draws attention to a policy pursued by the US government after 9/11, whereby large educational aid packages were directed to countries which were considered to be centres for Islamic radicalization. The objective was to reduce Islamist influence by encouraging governments to adopt modern and secular forms of education in preference to traditional religious schooling. Pakistan, for example, received over 250 million dollars in aid as part of a package whose goal was described as “wresting control [of schools] from the Mullahs.” One of the initiatives this money funded was the introduction of English teaching at elementary school level. Apart from being seen as a contribution to economic development, English language teaching was also regarded by the architects of the US policy as a way of countering religious extremism and inculcating pro-western attitudes.

It might be asked why these policymakers believed that learning English would have these ideological effects. The answer seems to lie in the old idea that each language has its own distinctive character, and functions as a vehicle for the values it embodies. That idea has been elaborated extensively in discourse on English, which is recurrently said to embody the virtues of openness, tolerance, pragmatism and democracy; in many popular histories of the language (a recent example is McCrum 2010) these qualities are invoked to account for its meteoric rise from obscure Germanic dialect to global lingua franca. In reality the spread of English is explained not by its inherent qualities, but by the success of its speakers in pursuit of the classic four Cs—commerce, conquest, colonisation and conversion. But English boosterism remains a significant current in popular verbal hygiene discourse, and the values the language is supposed to embody have taken on a new political significance in the post-9/11 context. In 2003, for instance, the right-wing commentator Paul Johnson offered a linguistic defence for the US-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, describing the US as “uniquely endowed to exercise global authority, because America has the language of the 21st century.” “A more secure world,” he continued, “will be legislated for, policed and adjudicated in English” (quoted in Karmani 2005, 265. For one account of what is actually being mystified in this representation of English, see Piller and Cho 2013.)

The genre of verbal hygiene discourse this comment belongs to is always structured, implicitly if not explicitly, by an opposition between English and some inferior or threatening Other. In post-9/11 verbal hygiene, the Other is most likely to be Islam. Where English is figured as the language of legitimate global authority, and as a natural vehicle for the core western values of rationality, moderation, tolerance and democracy, Islam is irrational, fanatical, intolerant and autocratic. It is also un-modern: whereas “America has the language of the 21st century,” Islam in this discourse is stuck in the dark ages.

An obvious objection to this analysis is that English/Islam does not work as an opposition, because Islam denotes a religion rather than a language. But in this kind of verbal hygiene discourse the language is always in any case a metonym, standing for the community of its speakers or the culture at large. The part-whole relation can equally go in the other direction: the qualities predicated of Islam can be projected onto the language with which it is associated. In the case of Islam there is a clear association with one language in particular: Arabic, the language of the Qur’an. (Not that the Arabic of the Qur’an is the language used by Arabic speakers in everyday discourse, but that nuance does not seem to impinge on western commentators who make use of this equation.)

Othering discourse by English-speakers on Arabic has a long history, and the connection with modern Islamic fundamentalism had already been made well before 9/11. In 1995, for instance, a contributor to the *Middle East Quarterly* had posed the question “Does the Arabic language encourage radical Islam?” (see Coffman 1995). He concluded that the answer was “yes,” and not only because Arabic has been shaped by Islamic culture and history; at a basic level, he claimed, the language resists or prevents critical thought. This is not just one author’s personal prejudice. In 2011, the ACLU got hold of a PowerPoint presentation which was being used to train FBI agents to interrogate people who were either speakers of Arabic or from an Arabic-speaking cultural background. As reported by the broadcaster Al-Jazeera (2011), the presentation included a section on language, which asserted among other things that “spoken words are to Arabs as music,” and “it is the characteristic of the Arabic mind to be swayed more by words than ideas, and more by ideas than facts.” As a literal proposition, this seems not so much wrong as just meaningless. Facts are surely also ideas, and many though not all words are the signifiers of ideas. But at a symbolic level the import is clear enough: Arabs speak a language ungoverned

by the norms of truth and logic. It is utterly alien and threatening to western democratic values.

As with British discourse on the “home-grown terrorist,” though, what is elided in this discourse is that large numbers of educated Arabic-speakers do, in fact, also speak English—including, as Sohail Karmani points out, the 9/11 bombers, who would not have been able to carry out their plans successfully without some degree of proficiency in the majority language of the US. It might also be noted that the British men responsible for the 7/7 bombings were influenced by the online preaching of Anwar al-Awlaki, an Arab-American who was an asset to al-Qaeda because his command of English enabled him to reach a global audience. More generally, Karmani observes, global terrorism is like global trade and global tourism: it requires a transnational currency, whether financial (like the US dollar) or linguistic (like English). Far from being inimical to the enterprise of anti-western terrorism, English is indispensable to it both ideologically (as in the preaching of Anwar al-Awlaki) and logistically (as with the 9/11 hijackers).

### **Conclusion**

Post-9/11 verbal hygiene clearly does not represent a complete break with older discourses on multi- and monolingualism. In fact, the analysis presented here suggests that it is relatively easy to transfer the symbolic meaning the opposition had in traditional discourses on language and nation into the political context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For instance, the unity monolingualism stood for in traditional discourses derived from the (real or imagined) ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the nation; in the contemporary British discourse discussed above, the concept of national unity has been de-ethnicized and renamed “community cohesion.” What remains more or less unchanged, however, is the basic verbal hygiene equation (“one language = unity, many languages = fragmentation”). Arguably this works well in part because it has a long history: in the course of time it has been naturalized as common sense.

But examining verbal hygiene discourse on language and the “war on terror” also reveals some interesting contradictions. In British political rhetoric on “cohesion,” it is clear that multilingualism is the negative term in the opposition, while (English) monolingualism is the positive term. But as soon as the focus shifts from national to international or global politics, as it necessarily does in discourse on war and terrorism, it is no longer a simple case of “monolingualism

good, multilingualism bad.” One theme of the discourse discussed above is that English, specifically, is good for everyone: it is the language of modernity, democracy, and security. The British government’s foreign and overseas aid policy, like the US policy discussed by Sohail Karmani, gives active support to the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. These governments are for monolingualism at home, but multilingualism abroad.

It might be argued that in current verbal hygiene discourse and practice, the key opposition is not “one and many”—that is, mono- and multilingualism in the abstract. Rather it is between “the one and the Other”—that is, English, the pre-eminent global language of the present era, and some specific other language with which it is contrasted for the purposes of a particular discursive context. This paper has touched on the positioning of Arabic as English’s Other in discourse on terrorism and the supposed “clash of civilizations,” but in different contexts the Other might be Bengali, or Gaelic, or Chinese.

One of the things that might be being expressed in contemporary versions of this kind of discourse is anxiety among English-speakers that the power they have wielded in the world for 400 years may soon be eclipsed. The resurgent popularity of mass-market books which rehearse the story of English from Anglo-Saxon times to the present, and attribute its current pre-eminence to its distinctive characteristics as a language, is arguably one sign of this anxiety. At the same time, a number of books have recently appeared (addressed to the same kind of general audience that reads the “story of English” genre) which discuss what might in future fill the “One” slot now occupied by English.

Not surprisingly, one common candidate for this role is Chinese/Mandarin, reflecting the general expectation that China will be the next global superpower. There is now a genre of discourse that seeks to explain the rise of China and/or the decline of the west in linguistic terms, by contrasting English unfavourably with Chinese. For instance, it has been argued that whereas English was well adapted for the industrial/print era, Chinese writing is better suited to the post-industrial/digital age (Yglesias 2012). Another suggestion (made e.g. by McCrum 2010) is that the world will adopt a simplified auxiliary language based on English, such as the 1500-word “Globish.” And yet another is that the need for a global lingua franca will be obviated in the future by advances in machine translation.



This last is the argument made by Nicholas Ostler (2011) in his book *The Last Lingua Franca*. Ostler believes that English, like every other lingua franca in history, will eventually lose its current pre-eminence, but he does not think that any single language either will or should replace it. In his vision of the future, translation technology will make it unnecessary for anyone to be multilingual; this will also have the happy consequence of preventing the future extinction of any surviving mother tongue. Leaving aside the question of whether this scenario is technologically feasible, the ideologically and sociolinguistically interesting assumption it depends on is that if people had the choice, they would choose to be monolingual. They would not want to learn languages other than their native tongue if the benefits of doing so (e.g. communication across difference, access to resources, power and influence) could be had by other means. At times Ostler seems to be asserting what many scholars in this field have decried as a nationalist myth: that monolingualism rather than multilingualism is humanity's natural state. This champion of global linguistic diversity (Ostler is an active supporter of endangered language preservation and revitalization) has nevertheless produced a discourse which implicitly valorizes, albeit not for the usual reasons, monolingualism over multilingualism.

Should Ostler's "return of Babel" ever actually come to pass, a line will be drawn under the history of this troublesome opposition. But that will not resolve the question which animates, at a deeper level, current verbal hygiene discourse on the one, the many and the Other. That question is not which languages or how many languages we should speak, but what values the ideal linguistic order—and by extension, the ideal social and political order—should be based on.

**Editors' Note:** A link to the talk upon which this essay is based, from April 13, 2012, is available [here](#).

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