

To BME or not to BME?

Questions, notes and thoughts about language, again

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Don't point, Gregory

In Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island*, mainly set in post-*Windrush* 1940s Britain, the main character goes out for the first time in her life to a London street. She sees a small boy with his mother. The boy attracts his mother's attention by yelling 'Look! She's black. Look, Mum, black woman.' – 'Don't point, Gregory', says the woman. 'She's not black, she's coloured.' From the other side of the road comes shouting, loud, uncouth and raucous. 'Golliwog, golliwog.' It's three young men. Holding up a wall they yell through the funnel of their hands: 'Oi, Sambo.'

The episode captures two important points about the subject-matter of this article, the nature and functions of language about so-called race. First, it is a reminder that such language is both contested and continually changing. Each generation establishes a way of speaking and this is challenged and overthrown by the next generation, as soon as it has the power to do so. In the 1940s 'coloured' was considered polite and 'black' was as unusable in polite circles as pointing at strangers ('Don't point, Gregory.') Nowadays, the word 'black' is in widespread use and 'coloured' would never pass the lips of, say, the readers and users of *Race Equality Teaching*.

Second, regardless of what happens to language in polite circles, the language of the street remains much the same: 'Oi, Sambo.' And it's not only language that stays much the same on the street. Also, crude colour racism doesn't change, though increasingly it intertwines nowadays with cultural racism. The world out there – the world that exists independently of our perceptions of it, and of our wishful thinking about it, and that is frequently violent and unjust – does not change simply because we choose to say 'coloured' instead of 'black', or vice versa.

Language matters

Nevertheless, language matters. How you name something affects how – and, indeed, whether – you see it, and then how and whether you act on it. A trivial example: a year or two ago I was lost in a foreign city. Every street, canal, bridge and building seemed the same. My companion and I seemed to be going round in circles. My companion, it is relevant to mention, is a near-professional gardener. Suddenly she said: 'Oh I know where we are. I distinctly remember passing that *lysimachia nummularia goldilocks* [or some such] in the window box over there. We turned left after it but we should have turned right.' So we turned right and lo, we were no longer lost. Being able to name something enables you to see it, and to do the right thing, and not be lost.

A much more serious, important and relevant example: when those two young police officers arrived in Wall Hall Road, Eltham, in the late evening of Thursday 22 April 1993, where Stephen Lawrence lay dying, they were unable to see racism. And this was because they couldn't say the word racism, it wasn't in their active vocabulary. Nor was it in the active vocabulary of senior officers. Racism, said someone at the time of Sir William Macpherson's Inquiry, rises up through the ranks, meaning the inability to say and to see is ever more prevalent, and ever more dangerous, the higher up an organisation one goes. Acquiring new words about race in your active vocabulary doesn't necessarily mean, of course, that there's no more verbal or physical violence on the streets, and no more dumbness and blindness in the organisational culture around you. But it's a start. Language matters. There's much more to antiracist action than getting your words right. But getting your words right, or more right,

less fuzzy, is not irrelevant. *Le mot juste* nurtures and sustains *l'action juste* – just the right word nurtures and sustains actions that are just. A wrong or fuzzy word, on the other hand, prevents, or may prevent, you from seeing what's in front of your eyes, and what needs to be done. As philosophers say, the limits of one's language are the limits of one's world.

Well, readers of *Race Equality Teaching* know all this. It needs re-saying for at least two reasons. One is that attacks in the tabloid press on the 'political correctness brigade', as they call it (us, dear reader) seem currently to be ever more hysterical. Teachers and other educators are increasingly on the back foot. Second, readers and users of *Race Equality Teaching* arguably need to talk and think, yet again, about these things.

We have been there – here – before, of course, over the years. Multicultural education or antiracist education? Black or ethnic minority? Ethnic minority or minority ethnic? Racial equality or race equality? West Indian, Afro-Caribbean or African-Caribbean? Equality or diversity? Which words should be hyphenated? Which should have capital letters? Which should be in inverted commas? Is BME a helpful and convenient abbreviation, or is it offensive and absurd? When and where are abbreviations appropriate and inappropriate? (I was at a meeting the other day when someone said something like this: 'We're working on our REIA under the RRAA, though we haven't many BMEs, particularly in PCDL and WBL, but we're taking E and D seriously and some of our EAL staff are now ASTs who deliver CPD.' An item on the meeting's agenda, incidentally, was 'community consultation'.)

The tabloid press

From time to time local authorities draw up style guides on these matters for their staff. This can get the tabloid press very excited – loony left, barmy borough, silly city, the political correctness brigade strikes again. How *dare* they ban policeman, fireman and chairman? How *dare* they tell us the word ethnic is offensive? How *dare* they say the very phrase 'political correctness' is objectionable? Such coverage sells papers, for it panders to readers' anxieties about cultural and demographic change, about shifting power relations, and about the consequences of globalisation. It also, alas, intimidates local and national politicians. In consequence, indirectly, it intimidates the public officials who work for elected politicians. Legislation on race relations and equal opportunities requires that policies in the public sector should be 'equality-proofed'. What actually often happens, though, is 'Daily Mail-proofing', or its local equivalent.

Readers and users of *Race Equality Teaching* would be better placed to take on the tabloids if they had more debate amongst themselves. As a contribution to such debate, this article continues with some admittedly polemical – some will say, opinionated and misguided – notes and remarks. I will leave 'BME' till last. First, I will consider Britain/Great Britain/United Kingdom. This may seem a strange way to start. But the fact is that issues of race and multiculturalism are intimately intertwined with notions of, and names for, nation and nationality. One of the things the tabloids deplore about the political correctness brigade is that it questions comfortable assumptions about national history and identity. Disagreements about how to name the country are part of wider arguments and disagreements about how to see and imagine the past and the national story, and about who does and doesn't belong here. Race and nation intertwine.

Britain/Great Britain/United Kingdom

All government departments use the terms *Britain* and *UK* as meaning the same thing, and use the term *Great Britain* to refer to England, Scotland and Wales, not the whole of the UK. The one exception to this rule is the Home Office guidance for the citizenship test, and for teachers and students of English worldwide. It is ironic and significant that the guidance is, simply, *wrong*. If an immigrant aspiring to gain British citizenship follows the Home Office guidance about the difference between Britain and Great Britain they will fail the test.

The publication in question is *Life in the United Kingdom: a journey to citizenship* published by the Home Office in 2005. It is intended to be 'a compendium of information', it declares, and its aim is 'to assist teachers of English as a second language, mentors and others helping

immigrants to integrate.' In addition, it is intended to aid 'immigrants ... who have workable English already and who are required to take a citizenship test if ... they apply for naturalisation as full British citizens with political and legal rights and duties.' The key passage about the naming of the parts of the UK is on the opening page. It goes like this:

The name of our country on British passports is 'The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' ... Most people, however, say 'Britain' or 'Great Britain'. Usually 'Britain' refers to the mainland and 'Great Britain' includes Northern Ireland, and also the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

To repeat, this is wrong – in the sense that no other government department would claim that Great Britain includes Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, nor would the BBC or any dictionary or encyclopaedia. If even the Home Office doesn't know where Britain is, and promulgates false information to immigrants and around the world, there is hope for the rest of us. It is not unreasonable for us, more often than not, to take an amused and relaxed interest, not an interest that is fierce and indignant, in the antics of ourselves, our friends and our opponents in relation to contested and ever-changing language.

In international forums, for example the United Nations, the state we're in is the UK. But in American English, Great Britain is frequently used as an abbreviation for UK, and this usage also occurs in, for example, reports about the Olympic Games – though not, incidentally, the Eurovision Song Contest, where we are firmly *Royaume Uni*.

Tabloids like using the term *Great Britain*, since it enables them to run campaigns with slogans such as *Put the Great Back into Britain*. (*The Sun*, 4 August 2005.) This particular campaign was about 'reviving the lost senses of duty and pride' and combating 'terror attacks, radical rants and politically-correct policing'. The emotional resonance of *Great Britain* is also clear in the breakfast menu of a prestigious hotel chain: 'Would you like a continental breakfast,' the menu asks, with an implied sneer at those effete croissants, 'or the breakfast that made Great Britain great?' Such usage conveniently ignores the fact that the term Great Britain is simply a translation of the Latin phrase *Magna Britannica*, which referred to, as it were, 'Greater England' – the whole island, not just part of it. Cf. 'Greater London' or 'Greater Manchester'.

Equality and diversity

Political and moral philosophers insist that equality and diversity are two sides of the same coin – equality without recognition of relevant differences, and without positive action to redress and remove injustice, is not true equality. A more familiar way of making the same point is to stress that treating people equally does not necessarily mean treating them the same. Differences should be recognised in a discriminating, but not discriminatory, way.

However, it must be recognised that the two words are current in different speech communities., rather like the two words Derry and Londonderry, discussed below. The term diversity tends to be more current in the private sector than in government contexts, whereas equality is more current in public bodies. Also, and partly in consequence, the term diversity is preferred in speech communities that do not like conflict and disagreement, for it sounds less confrontational. In particular, discourse about diversity is all too often a convenient way of not talking about, and therefore not seeing, racism.

By the way, 'celebrating diversity' is not necessarily a good thing. The phrase is best avoided altogether.

Race/ethnicity

As mentioned above, different words are used in different contexts and in different speech communities. With regard to discourse about race and ethnicity there are differences between:

- legal, administrative and official usage

- usage in most ordinary conversation, reflected and reinforced by usage in the media
- usage in academia.

The terms 'race' and 'racial' occur widely in legal and quasi-legal usage and often also in everyday conversations and the media; they virtually never nowadays, however, occur in academia, unless with inverted commas to signal they are problematic. The preferred term in academia is ethnicity.

Racist bullying/racist incident

It is sometimes thought that racist incidents are one-off, whereas racist bullying involves several incidents over time. However, a single incident can have the features of bullying. In this connection the DfES definition of racist bullying is relevant: 'a range of hurtful behaviour, both physical and psychological, that makes a person feel unwelcome, marginalised, excluded, powerless or worthless because of their colour, ethnicity, culture, faith community, national origin or national status.' A single incident can have this impact. All instances of racist bullying are racist incidents, as defined by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report. But not all racist incidents involve bullying. However, the vast majority of racist incidents in schools are examples of racist bullying and this latter term is usually, therefore, more accurate.

Racially motivated/racially aggravated

For many years the first of these two terms was part of legal discourse in Britain, particularly in England and Wales. But as a result of campaigns concerned with combating racist incidents and attacks, and bearing in mind the introduction in Scotland of the concept of 'aggravated by religious hostility' to combat sectarianism, legal usage in England and Wales has latterly been changing. It is now widely understood that the key issue is not primarily or only the motivation or mindset of offenders but the consequences of racist crimes for those who are attacked, and for the communities to which they belong.

Religion/faith

Traditionally, the word 'faith' referred to beliefs, as in the famous phrase 'faith, hope and charity', or in a phrase such as 'personal faith'. The word 'religion', however, referred to a broad tradition and did not necessarily imply private beliefs or regular attendance at public worship; this was the meaning implicit in the 2001 census question, 'What is your religion?' Latterly, however, partly as a result of US usage, the word 'faith' has been adopted as a synonym for broad religious affiliation or ethno-religious identity and no longer necessarily implies the existence of beliefs or the observance of practices.

This shift in meaning does not lead to greater clarity and on the contrary is unfortunate. The distinction between personal faith and ethno-religious affiliation is crucial and will become more so in the years ahead. The failure to observe this distinction has been evident, all too often, in recent public debates about the concept of incitement to religious hatred.

Islamophobia/anti-Muslim racism

Academics sometimes contend that a term such as anti-Muslim racism, or anti-Muslim intolerance, or – more neutrally – anxiety about relationships between 'Islam' and 'the West', is clearer than the term Islamophobia. Any word containing the idea of phobia, they point out, has implications of a severe mental illness affecting only a tiny minority of people. Whatever else Islamophobia is or isn't, it certainly isn't merely insane and it certainly doesn't affect a small minority.

However, the term Islamophobia is readily recognisable as similar to terms such as homophobia and xenophobia, and is now in general use and here to stay. Incidentally, it has happened before that an inappropriate word for a form of racism has been coined yet has come into common currency. Antisemitism is an absurd word, for there is no such thing as

Semitism, and in any case not all so-called Semites are Jewish and not all Jewish people are so-called Semites.

Derry/Londonderry

It is frequently the case that the choice of a word or phrase is also, wittingly and intentionally or otherwise, a choice to associate oneself with a particular community. This is particularly obvious in the case of Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland. Geographically, the two words refer to precisely the same place. But if you ask someone in Northern Ireland where they are going and they reply Derry or Londonderry what you learn is not only their destination but also, so to speak, where they are coming from. Derry is the term used by the Catholic, Republican and Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland and Londonderry is used in the Protestant, Loyalist and Unionist communities.

Racism/xenophobia

The term 'racism' generally implies a belief that human beings belong to different races, and that the principal marker of one's belonging is skin colour; the term 'xenophobia', however, refers to hostility to people whose culture and language are different from those of oneself. In recent years (say, since the 1970s) the word in other European languages translated into English as xenophobia has implied hostility towards migrant workers and settlers from, in particular, north Africa and Turkey. There are many similarities between racism in the UK and xenophobia in other European countries, and therefore in European contexts it is usual to use the phrase *racism and xenophobia* as referring to a single set of phenomena.

Islam/Islamist/Islamic

Islam is the name of the religion, whereas – strictly speaking – *Islamism* is the application of Islamic beliefs to issues of government and politics; it has come to imply, however, opposition both to 'the West' and to the governments of several Muslim countries, and a readiness to use violence. But since words such as *Buddhism*, *Hinduism* and *Judaism* are used to refer to religious traditions, not to political perspectives, the word *Islamism* is easily misunderstood and it is wrongly assumed that *Islamist* and *Islamic* are interchangeable. It is best to avoid the words *Islamist* and *Islamism*, unless one is confident that one's readers or hearers will readily understand.

Group/community/background/heritage

The term 'racial group' is enshrined in legislation. But its meaning in law could not possibly be guessed by common sense – neither the term racial nor the term group is used in law in the same way as in everyday conversation.

There is never an excuse, unless one is engaged in litigation or quasi-litigation, for using the term racial. There is only one race, the human race. But what about group? It's not only lawyers but also statisticians who use it, as in 'the Pakistani group', the 'white British group', the 'Black African group', 'ethnic minority groups'. Statisticians should be discouraged from using the word group, however, particularly in any document that is intended for others. Certainly there is no excuse for any of the rest of to use it, except in very local circumstances.

Community is preferable, since it implies belonging and affiliation, and has positive connotations. It should often be used in the plural, however – 'Muslim communities', not '*the* Muslim community'.

The terms background and heritage are also preferable – people of African-Caribbean heritage, employees from Pakistani backgrounds.

Minority ethnic /ethnic minority

The phrases *minority ethnic* and *ethnic minority* are in widespread official use. However, they have substantial disadvantages. The term *minority* frequently has connotations of marginal or less important and in many neighbourhoods, towns and cities in Britain it is

mathematically inaccurate or misleading. Further, its use unhelpfully implies that white people all belong to a single group, 'the majority', and that there are no significant differences amongst them. In point of fact there are substantial differences within the white population, including ethnic differences.

The term *ethnic* on its own is frequently misused in the media and in everyday conversation as a synonym for not-white or not-western, as in phrases such as 'ethnic clothes', 'ethnic restaurants', 'ethnic press', 'ethnic music'. Newspapers sometimes refer to 'ethnic writers', 'ethnic artists', 'ethnic communities', and even occasionally to 'ethnic children' or 'ethnic teachers'. There is frequently an implication of exotic, primitive, unusual, non-standard. In the education system, as elsewhere, it is unhelpful and disparaging to speak of 'ethnic children', 'ethnic teachers', 'ethnic languages'.

The term 'minority ethnic' is grammatically unsatisfactory since it consists of a noun followed by an adjective and since it implies that the adjective then qualifies the noun that follows. It is appropriate if the following noun is one which can logically follow the term ethnic, for example a noun such as background – it's grammatically OK to speak of minority ethnic backgrounds, but not of minority ethnic pupils. However, since the adjective ethnic has come to be a synonym for not white, the term minority ethnic in the popular mind is tautologous. It is best avoided, though the hyphenated form, minority-ethnic, is just about acceptable, since it signals that the distinction being made is with majority-ethnic.

The term 'people from minority ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds' is a convenient and acceptable way of referring to people not classified by the Office of National Statistics as 'white British'.

Occasionally one hears *ethnic* used as a noun, as in 'we have very few minority ethnics at our school.' This is seriously depersonalising and offensive. Certainly as a noun, and generally as an adjective, the word *ethnic* is therefore best avoided, except in its strict academic sense, namely as an adjective derived from the noun *ethnicity*, which refers to a way of classifying human groups and communities.

BME

BME – 'Black and ethnic minority' – has become current in government circles in recent years, not least, probably, because it is so short. It has all the disadvantages of any phrase using the word *minority*, however (see above), and has the additional disadvantage of implying that black people do not belong to an ethnic minority. Even more seriously, referring to people with a set of initial letters is basically reductionist, dehumanising and outrageous. (Cf. 'EAL children' or 'EMAG children'.) Another objection is that few of the people referred to with this label see it as an appropriate description of their identity.

Essentially, BME is merely the latest genteel euphemism for avoiding talking about, and seeing, racism. It is best avoided, particularly since, some 60 years after *Windrush*, there are plenty of white people (especially white people working in the civil service and in local government) capable of saying, in effect: 'No, she's not coloured, Gregory, she's BME.'