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*Who are 'we' and who are 'they'?*

*A Comment on Language Awareness in Educational Contexts*

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## **Language Awareness and Self-Reflectivity in Educational Contexts**

Becoming a teacher means entering into a context of education.

Education, to me, includes reflected thinking and putting oneself into context. Being a language teacher does not only mean knowing how to teach grammar and language use as language is always connected to cultural rooms. In the role of a teacher I feel responsible to involve young individuals in reflected thinking processes.

In language class, the context of language should be reflected on. When talking about language we need to talk about the implications of representations, prejudices, stereotypes or hierarchical thinking. Exemplarily, as racism in its varieties unfortunately is an issue in societies today, teachers need to be aware of where such mechanisms are developed and reproduced. The school as an educational institution should work against structurally rooted, implicit routines. I understand education as a chance as well as a challenge to sensitise young individuals for topics like nationality and cultural identity.

Although I am convinced that the amount of words expected for this essay is not enough, I will try and briefly speak about topics which I find relevant. I hope to make my motivation more clear when talking about the need of self-reflection especially in schools. In this context, I focus on the reflection on implicit racisms embedded in language habits. How can we deal with racist thinking and behaviours that come along with it? I don't dare formulating a solution. Rather, I am convinced that issues like this must be examined carefully. Questioning and reasoning a dramatically important and multi-faceted topic like this needs more than just 2000 words.

Within the seminar "British, American and Postcolonial Cultures – Past and Present" the main topic seemed to be 'identity' which entailed discussing factors that influence identity and its development, including culture, nations, sexuality and communities. Personally, I focused on the analysis of the use of language and its influence on the formation of identity. Speaking about identity in a seminar on postcolonial studies, I believe it is necessary to put the focus on English language and its influencing power on a global scale: What does the prestige of a language tell us about power relations? What does British English and American English mean in a postcolonial context?

I want to open this comment with a language example from class that stroke me. Rather

casually, my colleagues frequently used the pronouns “we” and “they” when speaking about 'other' cultural contexts. In this very case, “the Americans” and 'their' behaviours were marked, as a fellow student layed out a particular experience of nationalist stereotypes while participating in an exchange programm in the USA. The implicitness of the usage of those markers, caused me to question openly shared habits of speaking about cultural contexts in class.

Often, the concept of national identity is understood as synonymous with cultural identity. I am convinced that an awareness of the relation between language and the reproduction of ideas is crucial. In class and generally, we need to critically examine the language we use. To me, the start of any critical collective discussion needs to be setting a self-reflective linguistic base. As I experienced, the class did not reflect on and discuss about the usage of words such as “we” and “they”. Who are 'we' and who are 'they' - individuals or collective groups? Furthermore, which groups are being defined as 'we' and 'they'? Which (power-) relations are marked and from which position are speakers arguing from?

Generalising statements about defined groups, such as “Americans”, were utterances by colleagues which sounded like implicit objectivations of the 'Other' and 'its' cultural habits, to me. The strategy of pointing at another by marking differences is a deeply rooted thinking process which I could see was frequently used when 'culture' or 'identity' were discussed in class. Can we (as a class) step out of defining someone by simply marking differences to others?

Many questions arose during the semester. 'Language awareness' is a key term that came to my mind frequently. To me, being language aware includes thinking about the terms *cultural racism* or *critical whiteness*.

Racism is diverse and takes many forms. As oppose to German contexts where the word “Rasse” is less common or at least not uttered openly, the english word “race” commonly accepted and even used in official contexts to give name to ethnic groups.

In my eyes, racism plays with cultural-territorial feelings of 'Zugehörigkeit': This means relating human bodies to prescribed identities and behaviours that are believed to be connected. Racist mechanisms use biological characteristics to create and reproduce hierarchies on all sorts of levels.

In current postcolonial contexts, the term *cultural racism* needs to be taken into account aswell. I feel that racist differentiation based on the concept of 'culture' is the least reflected in my surrounding. In their text “Gewöhnliche Unterscheidungen. Wege aus dem Rassismus” Mecheril and Meller explain the term *cultural racism* by stating that nowadays the word *culture* is used to legitimise discriminatory behaviours. Differentiation here is not only defined through genetics but

also by social, cultural, religious, lingual and habitual characteristics. In comparison to *colonial racism* where the concept of the 'Other' is pushed into a lower position within a hierarchical order, cultural racism, as Mecheril and Miller claim, doesn't begin with negatively connoting the concept of 'the Others' in the first place. Instead, racism begins with defining 'the Other' as 'strange culture', a way of thinking which supports binary understandings.

I want to contextualise my use of language and I wish for individuals in my surroundings (especially in institutional contexts) to do so as well. We as educational practitioners can only encourage young people to think and behave in a self-reflected way if we have done so ourselves.

It's complex to speak about the concept of 'identity'. I prefer the term 'personality' as it focusses more on the individual than on groups and their collective contextualisation of feelings of identification.

The concept of identity and its formation is highly complex and cannot be explained by taking into account singular factors like sexuality, place of birth or cultural background. To me, identity on an individual level cannot be explained by territory or space. As Mecheril and Miller put it, the formation of identities cannot be rationalised through singular factors. On an individual basis, identities are informed by a complex multitude of factors which cannot be dissected in general terms. Notions such as 'national identity' shouldn't be discussed as collective concepts defined by political borders. Is 'national identity' a self-defined understanding of a group representing a territory? Throwing behaviours, habits and ways of thinking all together in a nutshell and calling the outcome 'national identity' enforces stereotypical and racist thinking.

Personally, what can I identify with? Instead of understanding my own identity as singular and defined, I identify more with the idea of roles that I play. I'm a daughter, friend, partner or teacher rather than being "German" or "European". Still, I'm aware that the common concept of 'nation' needs to be reflected on when contextualising culture in terms of power relations.

I need to be aware of the fact that English, predominately, is a language of power. I need to question why English is said to be the 'international' way of communication, the (First-) "World language". Historically seen, English is a language of political, cultural and linguistic imperialism. In itself, English can be tool of white hegemony. One could claim that by norm providing Englishes, like BA and AE, white identity is marked and the concept of normativity reproduced. Varieties such as dialects, sociolocets, creoles and pidgeon languages have been and are still declared outside the norm. 'Outside the norm' seemingly equals having low (language) prestige. I see such language hierarchies as one of many factors that are still reproducing hierarchical

structures and racist mechanisms.

Here the term 'critical whiteness' comes into play: It is said to be a process of critically reflecting on the concept of 'whiteness'. As Being 'white' is often declared the norm, it is 'normal' to be white and 'abnormal' not to be white, in my cultural context. The presence of whiteness is marked by distinction. Thus, normative binary thinking is dangerous when talking about whiteness. Basically, this can lead a separation into 'white' and 'non-white'. Isn't it highly problematic to understand everyone as white unless they are marked as non-whites? A change of focus and position is required, I think.

For me there is no easy answer or concrete solution to what needs to change. Racist mechanisms are driven by thinking processes deeply rooted and given forth by generations. Therefore, it is important to generate a critical language awareness, also on an educational level. This process needs to be iterated and practiced collectively.

Here, I come back to the use of the pronouns 'we' and 'they'. The national, ethnic and cultural differentiation between 'we' and 'not-we' has not been reflected on critically in class. I noticed a lack of reflection of shared language habits. Being situated in an institutional context, I want to remind myself of the definition of the term *institutional racism* stated in MacPerson-Report from 1999: "The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage [...] people." (Chapter 6.34).

This statement helps to underline the importance of awareness processes in education and educational institutions: Becoming aware of one's social privileges, one's agency in a greater context.

I understand working against heteronormative 'white' (and masculine) hegemony as my starting point of becoming aware of structurally rooted hierarchical thinking, particularly within educational contexts.

The 'I' is not an object.

