

LSE and Migration Museum Project public lecture

The Languages of Migration

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Good evening.

Before I start, can we do a quick survey of our lived experiences and close acquaintance with migration? I'm doing this so that we can bring the quick survey with us through the talk. Far too often, the conversation about migration takes place as if people who have experience of migration are somewhere else, outside over there .

So this mini-questionnaire I'm about to do, is the tip of an iceberg, the bottom part of the iceberg being what we might call 'our cultures of migration'...cultures that often lie obscured by the dominant rhetoric about migration.

How many people in the room have moved from another country or countries to live and/or work in the UK- short- medium or longterm ? [not me]

how many people in the room have at least one parent born in a country other than the UK? [me]

how many people have at least one grandparent born in a country other than the UK? [me]

how many people in the room have lived in a country other than the UK for more than a year? [not me] for more than 5 years? [not me] for more than 10 years? [not me]

Now spouses or partners:

how many people have a spouse or partner who comes originally from a non-UK country? [not me]

how many people who have a spouse or partner who has at least one grandparent who comes from a non-UK country. [not me]

Now, one to include all forms of migration - migration of any kind, some of which isn't called migration - it's called 'moving' (or 'being moved'):

how many people in the room are not living in the same house or flat they lived in as a child? [me]

I'll come back to this matter of the 'culture of migration' in thinking about my own background later but let's start in the eye of the storm, the conversations about migration that are going on at this very moment in the world of politics and the media. And in this part of the talk I want to be specific about the language around 'migrants', the language that colours the meaning of the words 'migrant', 'immigrant', 'immigration'.

Here's Barack Obama on Nov 20 2014

"Over the past few years, I have seen the determination of immigrant fathers who worked two or three jobs without taking a dime from the government, and at risk any moment of losing it all, just to build a better life for their kids. I've seen the heartbreak and anxiety of children whose mothers might be taken away from them just because they didn't have the right papers. I've seen the courage of students who, except for the circumstances of their birth, are as American as Malia or Sasha; students who bravely come out as undocumented in hopes they could make a difference in the country they love.

These people -- our neighbors, our classmates, our friends -- they did not come here in search of a free ride or an easy life. They came to work, and study, and serve in our military, and above all, contribute to America's success.

Tomorrow, I'll travel to Las Vegas and meet with some of these students, including a young woman named Astrid Silva. Astrid was brought to America when she was four years old. Her only possessions were a cross, her doll, and the frilly dress she had on. When she started school, she didn't speak any English. She caught up to other kids by reading newspapers and watching PBS, and she became a good student. Her father worked in landscaping. Her mom cleaned other people's homes. They wouldn't let Astrid apply to a technology magnet school, not because they didn't love her, but because they were afraid the paperwork would out her as an undocumented immigrant -- so she applied behind their back and got in. Still, she mostly lived in the shadows -- until her grandmother, who visited every year from Mexico, passed away, and she couldn't travel to the funeral without risk of being found out and deported. It was around that time she decided to begin advocating for herself and others like her, and today, Astrid Silva is a college student working on her third degree.

Are we a nation that kicks out a striving, hopeful immigrant like Astrid, or are we a nation that finds a way to welcome her in? Scripture tells us that we shall not oppress a stranger, for we know the heart of a stranger -- we were strangers once, too.

My fellow Americans, we are and always will be a nation of immigrants. We were strangers once, too. And whether our forebears were strangers who crossed the Atlantic, or the Pacific, or the Rio Grande, we are here only because this country welcomed them in, and taught them that to be an American is about something more than what we look like, or what our last names are, or how we worship. What makes us Americans is our shared commitment to an ideal -- that all of us are created equal, and all of us have the chance to make of our lives what we will.

That's the country our parents and grandparents and generations before them built for us. That's the tradition we must uphold. That's the legacy we must leave for those who are yet to come."

Here's Tory MP Bernard Jenkin on November 24 BBC Radio 4 Today programme

He cited Alan Milburn who spoke of Britain becoming a 'bifurcated nation'. Then he said:

'One of the things that's keeping low pay depressed is the endless supply of cheap labour coming in from the EU 8, the eastern European countries, the recent entrants to the European Union.'...

'This is causing real problems in hospitals, in schools, the provision of public services, shortage of housing.. We need to address this in the public interest.'

By the way, on the programme earlier in the interview, Bernard Jenkin showed his great familiarity with poor people by doubting if the BBC employed people on low pay. Perhaps he doesn't know of the thousands of people working for the BBC as runners, researchers, cleaners, trainees, cafe staff and so on, many of whom are not only his special interest group, he seems to be saying - people on low pay - but are also migrants or children or grandchildren of migrants...But then why would he know that?

And here's Nigel Farage, who as we'll hear, has a very intimate acquaintance with migrants.

This is from the Daily Telegraph 16 May 2014 as written by Matthew Holehouse, the paper's Political Correspondent.

"Mr Farage was asked to justify claims made earlier this year that he feels "uncomfortable" and "awkward" on trains where nobody speaks English and parts of Britain are now "a foreign land".

He said in February: "I got on the train the other night, it was rush hour, from Charing Cross.

"It was a stopper going out and we stopped at London Bridge, New Cross, Hither Green, it was not till we got past Grove Park that I could hear English being audibly spoken in the carriage. Does that make me feel slightly awkward? Yes it does."

Mr Farage's wife, Kirsten, is German, and his children are bilingual. Mr Farage said she speaks English outside the home.

"You felt uncomfortable about people speaking foreign languages, despite the fact presumably your own wife does when she phones home to Germany," said James O'Brien, the host of LBC Radio.

Mr Farage replied: "I don't suppose she speaks it on the train, you know. That's the point I'm making."

Mr Farage stood by his view, given in a recent interview, that he would be "concerned" if he had Romanian neighbours.

"I was asked a question if a group of Romanian men moved in next to you, would you be concerned? If you lived in London I think you would be," he said. He said the crime statistics relating to Romanian immigrants are "eye-watering".

Asked why that would be different to German children moving in next door, he replied: "You know what the difference is."

He added: "We want an immigration policy that is not just based on controlling not just quantity but quality".

"I'm not demonising anybody. I'm demonising a political class who has had an open door allowing things like this to happen."

Mr O'Brien claimed there is an "avalanche of bigotry emerging" from Ukip and it represents "deeply divisive and racist ideas." He accused Mr Farage of conflating the trend of primary school children who speak English as a second language with those who cannot speak English at all. Mr Farage said the trend shows the need for tighter immigration controls.

But the former category would include Mr Farage's own children, Mr O'Brien said. "The point you are making is that children in the East End are full of children who can't speak English. I want you to recognise that's not true," he said. "Most bilingual children in this country are children like yours."

So from Barack Obama to Bernard Jenkin and Nigel Farage - all using language about migration - but in very different terms.

Obama has chosen to highlight the migrant and invested that word with ideas of struggle, incredibly hard work, sacrifice and bravery. He then went on to picture the reception of the migrant in America as traditional, righteous and historically normal - he posited the idea that everyone is a migrant. He also made a point of drawing on a notion of equality - enshrined in the founding principles of the United States. What was also crucial here was that he was suggesting that these ideas and principles were bigger and more important than illegality - or at the very least - the government could and should overcome the matter of illegality. So, though illegality is often attached to the word 'migrant', Obama suggests that the government could side with the migrant to overcome the illegality or in language terms - detach illegality from the word 'migrant'.

Needless to say, there are people who are appalled by what Obama has said here and many will take it to 'prove' - prove in quotes - that he is, as they have always said, a foreigner and a communist Muslim; or is that a Muslim communist?

From a radical perspective, it's possible to raise an eyebrow at one aspect of the speech. The US is indeed a nation of migrants including the first nation peoples who migrated into what we call North America any time from about 40,000 years ago. It's a pity they didn't get a mention.

There's also the question of whether America is as different from other countries as Obama suggests. Is there a country in the world that is not a nation of immigrants? Is there any nation in the world that is made up of only the descendants of people who lived in that precise land mass for, what shall we say, 40,000 years? I suspect that Obama was drawing on folk memory and American people's knowledge of family history when he says 'nation of immigrants', rather than making an observation about the history of all human beings everywhere. I'll make that observation instead: we are a world of migrants.

Now for Bernard Jenkin.

Jenkin draws on what some might regard as a radical image, a 'bifurcated nation' meaning the split between rich and poor. Humane though that this might seem to be, migrants in his language are not people. He doesn't even use the word 'migrant'. We don't hear a Jenkin equivalent of Obama's Astrid Silva or the father with three jobs or the woman cleaning in people's homes or the children who are anxious that their mother might be deported. In Bernard Jenkin's language, migrants are 'an endless supply of cheap labour'.

What can we say about this? Well, first off, whatever it is, it's not 'endless'. There are finite numbers involved. It's not a 'supply' because no one is supplying them. And the phrase 'cheap labour' is a handy way of dehumanizing people by reducing them to the price of their labour - that is to say a cost. But labour is a cost purely and only from the point of view of an employer. Working people don't look at their pay slips and say, 'Ah here's my cost'. Now let's remind ourselves of what, according to Jenkin, these costs, these massed economic units do: they 'keep low pay depressed'.

Now I don't know exactly what goes on in board rooms. I've only ever seen them in documentaries or mocked up in film and TV. But someone tell me, what are those people doing in there if they're not doing all they can to 'keep low pay depressed'? I thought that this was what shareholders want them to do. In their terms, isn't this keeping the cost of labour down? How, in the Jenkin universe, is the dehumanized mass of labour that Jenkin shakes in front of us, able to do that? Aren't they living people who turn up and apply for a job? Throughout most of my childhood and adolescence I heard

employers telling a terrible story: they were being brought to their knees by vicious people called trade unionists who did all they could to stop low pay being depressed. Then, the story goes, the heavens opened and we finally got a prime minister who put a stop to all that.

I raise this, in order to clarify why it is that Bernard Jenkin of all people would object to 'low pay' being 'depressed'? After all, it's his party which says that the way to having (I quote) a 'resilient economy' is through the wise and necessary implementation of a low wage policy. So what can his objection be? Or has he just found a bit of populist language for the Today programme to attach to the idea he has of migrants?

Then he says that migration is causing problems for the public services. So, here, the migrant is now attached to an image: the image of overcrowded schools, packed hospital waiting rooms, and tiny huddles of hard-pressed social workers. Now, you and I may have noticed that these particular images have in the last four years been attached to something else altogether - the 'resilient economy'... which, we are told, can only be achieved through Bernard Jenkin's government wisely and sagely cutting back on schools, hospitals and social services.

As Dennis Skinner put in the House of Commons when the new UKIP MP, Mark Reckless took his seat this week: 'I have a united nations heart.' Our public services - apparently having problems from migrants according to Jenkin - also happen to be/ and have been staffed by hundreds of thousands of migrants since the 1950s. So what is it? Staffed or besieged? And if it's besieged, how does cutting the services help?

I suspect that his has much more to do with populism than logic: the idea of the 'migrant' is attached to blame as Jenkin makes them solely responsible for the effects of the cuts his government implements, and he somehow manages not to attach the word to praise, as Dennis Skinner did, for the decades of hard work running the public services which he claims to want to defend on our behalf.

Now to Farage -

first there is problem for him: he claims he couldn't hear English being spoken between London Bridge and Grove Park. I travel all over the London transport systems and the only time I've been in a carriage where there is no English being spoken at all is when a couple of classes of French or German school children fill it up. But that's not what he means, is it? He wants to invoke something that he hopes will appear more sinister.

I very much doubt that he's telling the truth. After all, a great proportion of migrants speak English because English people migrated to their countries. You'll know the old gag about the migrant from one of the countries of the British Empire who is asked why his family live in England and he says, 'We're here, because you were there.' Gags like that, it should be said are part of an alternative and resistant language of migration.

So, I suspect that Farage is dabbling in something rather nasty here. He wants to conjure up a picture of a public service taken over and blocked up by foreigners. The reason why you or I are crammed into the train at rush hour, he is saying, is because it's full of migrants. Crowded trains, he suggests, are nothing to do with the resources spent on transport in this country, but entirely down to people who have come to the UK to work - sometimes driving the very train that Farage is sitting on while he curses migrants.

Even so, let's imagine for a moment that Farage is right: there's a carriage full of people not speaking English. What precisely is the objection here? Should there be a rule about speaking English in public spaces? Should Farage's awkwardness-count be respected in law? Has he never been on the Costa Brava or in a cafe in south-west France where you can hear a lot of English being spoken? In his blokey way is he going to point out how 'awkward' that must be for the Spanish and French natives? Or is awkwardness a one-way street?

In fact it rather seems as if the only awkward thing going on for Farage is that he keeps going on about this stuff about foreigners, even as he lives with a migrant, a migrant who we discover does that suspect thing of speaking another language. And as the interviewer points out, this person almost certainly speaks to her relatives on the phone in that language whilst living in England. But, more importantly, as we gather, unlike the train babble, Mrs Farage does some kind of OK-foreign-language-talking. So we've got a new duality here: bad-language-migrant, good-language-migrant. Let's not look for logic here. This is more populist flame-throwing.

Farage's next bit of language is doing something classic: it's the politician's rhetoric of recruitment. This can be done by using the word 'you' when at very best the politician means 'I'. So, apparently if Romanians moved in, 'you' would be concerned. This is because, says Farage, Romanians commit crimes. Here the word migrant is attached to criminality - one of the main props for selling newspapers for as long as anyone has been identified as a migrant. To sell this one, a politician has to be sure to avoid comparing like with like. Comparing crime figures by nationality doesn't compare like with like. Nationalities come to a country with very different amounts of money in their pockets and cv's in their bags. In this particular case, if we want to find out if there is or is not anything surprising or distinctive going on, a comparison might be fairer between, say, different groups of poor, young single males. Even so, criminality is not an objective measure. It's a measure as done by the police. Since the Stephenson report, it is now public knowledge that how and why the police make arrests is not an unbiased matter.

But Farage's purpose is to avoid nuance: keep it short - attach the word migrant to criminality.

And then he performs another old dodge of the anti-migrant - the verbal nudge-nudge. When asked why a Romanian moving in next door would be different from someone like Mrs Farage moving in, he says, 'You know what I mean'.

This nudge-nudge phrasing is ideal if you don't want to be accused of being racist. While saying everything, it appears to say nothing. It makes the listener responsible for the racism. The bad migrant, the invading neighbour is here attached to whatever bad thoughts might be swirling around in your mind. Given that newspapers have worked overtime for well over a hundred years suggesting that migrants have a particular interest (on account of being migrant) in committing unspeakable crimes, we might ask why wouldn't I do as Farage suggests and nudge-nudge 'know what he means'? In fact, some of us don't. We resist the nudge.

And then back with the foreign language question, it's clear that Farage would rather make the linguistic complexity of the migration very simple: foreigners speak foreign. And yet he must be intimately acquainted with how nuanced these things can be, how his wife has come, we might suspect, to be very fluent in English, how their children are growing up bilingual, how he too perhaps has some grasp of his partner's language. How, as a family, they mingle words and expressions across at least two languages. And if he wanted to be honest, he could find out in a matter of minutes that this is precisely the situation that prevails in most migrant households...a mixture of language-use across two or more languages. Far from this being strange or problematical, this is what happens in billions of households all over the world. What is strange and problematical is that Farage appears to think that it's strange or problematical. 'Appears to'. Surely it isn't problematical down at the Farages. So why is he saying that it is for others? Because the script of anti-migration-speak says to Farage, 'Go on about foreigners talking foreign. Attach migrants to the idea that they get together in huddles precisely in order to stop you understanding what they're saying. Suggest - without saying, that as migrants are attached to criminality, then you good English folks within earshot are entitled to think that the reason why foreigners talk foreign on our trains is so that they can plan to burgle your house, without you English people knowing about it. After all, before there were migrants, no one went burgling.'

There was, Farage implies, a time when there was a pre-migrant London and this never-existing pre-migrant London was a burglar-free zone.

So, by comparing Obama's rhetoric with that of Jenkin's and Farage's we can see that politicians have options on how to speak about migrants.

But so far, this talk has hardly touched on another matter in the language of migration, the voice of the migrants.

Let me get personal and as I do so, I hope you'll compare your family and historical experiences of migration.

My father was born in the United States. He came to London when he was two. His father, who was born in Poland, stayed in the US along with two of my father's brothers who had been born in London. My father's mother was born in England. Her mother and father were born in Poland. I don't expect you to remember any of that. Indeed in many migrant families, even family members find it hard to remember this sort of thing. It's the stuff of a hundred stories, coincidences, losses, and strange meetings.

Poland for many Jewish emigrants was known in Yiddish, as 'der Heim' which literally means 'home' but it came to mean 'the homeland' or something more vague like 'back there'. Again the culture of migration, creates popular shorthand phraseology that doesn't tally neatly with the concerns of politicians with their cricket supporting tests and nationality exams. In the case of the term 'der Heim' it's transnational, Jews of many different nationalities all over the world called it that. The language of migration crosses many borders.

In this passage I'm about to read you'll hear the Yiddish words for grandfather which is 'zeyde', grandmother - which is 'bubbe' and a crazy person which is 'meshuggene'. Part of the language of migrants is that they often talk in many tongues like this. Here's my father writing:

"We would stand by the edge of the grubby old public swimming pool drying ourselves, my zeider and I. As likely as not he would tell me once again about how he would go swimming back in der heim somewhere in Poland. I would listen to this fragment of his boyhood. Always I saw him in some Arcadian setting of endless pine trees and velvet grass sloping down to a still lake. It was always early morning. He would emerge from a log cabin, run to the water and fracture its stillness with strong strokes. He would go on swimming till he was lost to view. There were no other people, no other houses, no other movements. It was an idyll I clung to from which I had banished pogroms and poverty and the fearful little community huddled over their prayers and sewing machines. That was my story not his. And when we went on day trips to Southend, East London's seaside, in his sixties he would set out to swim the length of the pier and back, a mile or so each way. My bubbe without fail went through the identical torments of anxiety. 'The meshuggene! He's gone out too far again.' I was free from all such fears. For he was always the intrepid boy swimmer in the pure lake who always came back. And he did. And even in death still does.'

So, my father carried about an image of another place, a mythic place of origin, which he shared with me and my brother through language.

And there's this:

"Zeyde's jokes baffled me at first and I would have to put on a phony laugh at stories I wasn't ready for. He once told me of the great sage Rabbi Nachman. I've heard it in dozens of versions since. The old rabbi was on his deathbed, and his devoted disciples gathered round and took their last chance to ask him the great question.

'Rabbi Nachman, tell us what is life?'

They waited for a long time, fearful that they would not hear a reply. At long last the rabbi gasped out, 'Life - is like a fish.'

Baffled, they hastily conferred and came back to his bedside.

'Rabbi Nachman, why is life like a fish?'

The old man looked at them,

'So - it's not like a fish.'

Zeyde gave the rabbi's reply the tone of impatient irritation. How was this a joke? The adults loved it. Relished it and would repeat, 'So? It's not like a fish' and fall about. In due course I came to laugh too."

What do stories like this tell us?

Lines of language, thought and culture that persist across countries and across time. No matter what Jenkin and Farage say, the word migrant in my mind is much more attached to these lines than to the lines they want to make.

And though there's nothing wrong with sentiment and nostalgia, from my position of comfort, it's easy to forget that some of these lines are stories of persecution, separation, hardship, humiliation or worse.

In my father's writing, there are memories of relatives talking about Cossacks charging at people in Russia but also of standing between his mother and grandfather on a demonstration during the General Strike of 1926. A few months ago, my step-mother came to the house with a little plastic jar full of odds and ends that had belonged to my father, some dating back to the 1920s. In amongst them, was a small brass brooch in the shape of a miner's lamp. I looked it up on the internet and discovered that such brooches were sold to support the miners' families who were on strike or locked out after everyone else went back to work during and after the General Strike. I can't be certain, but it probably belonged to his mother or grandfather.

When I hear that the word 'migrant' has to be tested for its owner's allegiance to Britain, I think that that's only one kind of allegiance. Isn't there an allegiance to the people around us? I have to spell it out for myself - perhaps for you, or perhaps not. Here are these people standing behind me, with their memories of a real or mythic heim, telling mythic jokes about Rabbi Nachman and buying a brooch to send money to South Wales, or Yorkshire or Lanarkshire for families who, according to the migrant-versus-native-Briton scenario, lived lives utterly different from my relatives, or indeed, said the propaganda of the day, utterly opposed to each other. Whichever of the two main stereotypes attached to Jews of the time: 'as rich as Baron Rothschild' or as 'poor, stingy, filthy, greasy and jabbering' as in William Makepeace Thackeray's poem 'The White Squall', neither of them would have included buying a brooch for hungry miners' families.

As I am doing right now, I write about such things.

Because of that, I, like other writers, become magnets for other people's tales.

My second cousin wrote to me a few years ago to say that his mother's second husband had left behind some papers. In the papers there were letters and cards that had been sent from Poland and France during the Second World War. They were in German.

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