Innocent and ideological discourses of culture

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Discourses of culture are ways of talking about culture which then take on a life of their own and can easily begin to dominate what we think is real about culture. They are dealt with in detail in chapter 7 of Holliday (2013), where I locate them in the **particular cultural products** domain of my grammar of culture, as the underpinnings of **statements about culture**, which are cultural products in the sense that they are produced by people in a particular cultural setting as projections of how they want to be seen. (Throughout, the domains of the grammar are in bold. A brief description of the grammar can be found at http://adrianholliday.com/articles/.)

A discourse is a way of using language which represents ideas about how things are. Discourses which are specialised ways of talking and writing that belong to particular groups, such as technical, professional, academic and political discourses, can be a powerful means of establishing ideas and forms of behaviour. They draw people in to the thinking which underpins them. In this sense, discourses are a central part of **small culture formation** and cultural reification in the grammar. They also relate to how **statements about culture** can easily become packaged in such a way that they are reified, and become considered the 'truth' about how things are.

It is important to note that discourses do not map easily onto particular groups of people. Throughout Holliday (2013) it is demonstrated that different people, at different times, for different reasons, can subscribe to different, and sometimes competing discourses of culture at the same time. Discourses are therefore like scripts which we can draw on to help us make sense of the realities we are facing.

Below is the list of discourses which I have identified. The names I have given them are of course working labels – ideal types in the Weberian sense – as a means of making my own sense of what is going on. These labels, and the categories of the thinking that they represent, are in effect the product of the 'critical cosmopolitan' discourse to which this author subscribes.

Innocent discourses

These are labelled 'innocent' because they derive from an objectivist tradition which takes for granted as fact a world which is divided into separate cultures each with their separate defining characteristics. As such, these innocent discourses deny that the descriptions of 'other' cultures may be marked by ideology through the influence of **global position and politics** in the grammar. This means that the possibility of prejudice in such descriptions is also denied. These discourses also deny that they are discourses. Indeed, the subscribers of each one will feel that their major motivation is a benevolent attitude towards either people from 'other cultures' or support for people interacting with those cultures.

'Essentialist culture and language' discourse

This states that cultures of large populations (e.g. national, continental, religious) are separate entities, each with their particular characteristics which define the traits and values of the people within them. Language has a major defining role.

Outcomes in the academy are national cultural profiling (e.g. Hofstede 2003; Triandis 1995), and cultural linguistics which associates particular languages with particular cultural values. More popular outcomes are cultural relativism and the use of 'culture' as a place which can be visited. Outcomes in practice are the presumed ability to describe, predict, differentiate and defend particular traits and values. There is a strong sense of cultural identity. Traits and values which do not fit the profile are exceptions; and change and deviation is thought to be caused by external influence.

The clear danger of this discourse, in its denial of ideology and belief that its categories are neutral, is that its descriptions and profiles are in effect idealisations or demonisations. This is exemplified in the differentiation between *collectivist* cultures (group oriented, hierarchical, indirect, traditional) and *individualist* cultures (self-direction, innovative, autonomy, direct, organising, planning ahead). While the former may seem protective of non-Western values, it is argued by many to represent cultural deficiency, while the latter represents success and proficiency in the modern world (Kim 2005; Kubota 1999; Kumaravadivelu 2012).

'Third space' discourse

This states that there is a neutral domain in which people from different cultures can come together and be themselves. It is associated with the notion of hybridity, and also the view that cultural values cannot really be totally shared. There is also a strong relationship between culture and the first language. In the academy it can be associated with a significant body of critical scholarship and research, often informed by a postcolonial sensitivity (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Guilherme 2002; Kramsch 1993; Zhu 2008). It is therefore innocent, not its political stance, but in its acceptance of an uncrossable intercultural line as an objective reality.

The danger in this discourse is that it takes the 'essentialist culture and language' picture of culture as its base and denies cultural travellers the possibility of being part of and innovating within new cultural realities, instead making them segmented and in-between (Kumaravadivelu 2007: 5).

'Liberal multicultural' discourse

This says that we can best respect and understand other cultures through the expression of the defining characteristics which place them apart. These can be seen in popular products, e.g. festivals, food and costumes. This discourse has been associated with political and social policies to encourage the expression and sharing of cultural artefacts through education.

The critics of this approach say that it supports Othering through its emphasis on reductive and exotic characteristics which do not recognise the full cultural complexity and richness of people's cultural backgrounds (Cantle 2012; Delanty et al 2008; Kubota 2004; Kumaravadivelu 2007: 104-6; Nathan 2010: 15; Spears 1999).

'West as steward' discourse

This says that modernity and progress resides in only the West. It has given rise to Oriental-ism through the notion that non-Western cultures are deficient and lack characteristics which can only be learnt in the West. It has provided a major excuse for colonialism, the 'War on terror' when associated with a fear of the non-democratic foreign, and an excuse for invading others so that they can be educated (e.g. Adichie 2007; Zimmerman 2006). In the academy it has been critiqued within postcolonial studies (e.g. Said 1978; Sangari 1994).

A significant aspect of this discourse is that its subscribers are not aware of its negative and Othering features. Part of its innocence is its subscribers' (often Western) definite belief that they are well-wishing and provide genuine support for people from non-Western cultures. It can be argued that this discourse is the major underpinning of military action against non-Western countries with the aim of saving their people.

Ideological discourses

These discourses are labelled 'ideological' because they are built on the premise that culture and ideology are deeply interconnected. They therefore recognise that they are discourses and ideologically motivated, with the potential for prejudice. At the same time, they accuse the innocent discourses of being ideologically motivated, with the potential of prejudice. This means that the labelling of the innocent discourses is itself a product of the ideological discourses – and in particular of the 'critical cosmopolitan' discourse, to which I as author subscribe. Implicit in ideological discourses is recognition of the need to continuously be wary of ideology and prejudice whenever statements about culture (in the grammar) are made.

'West versus the rest' discourse

This discourse says that the West is dominating the way culture is conceptualised and holds powerful notions of what is 'normal', 'desirable', 'proficient' and 'deficient'. It recognises Centre versus Periphery voices, where the Centre always defines and the Periphery is always defined. In the academy it has been the focus of critical sociology and cultural studies (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Hall 1996; Said 1978). In global politics it has fuelled popular resistance against Western hegemony and the recognition of complexity of marginal realities, and non-Western modernity and proficiency – and a bottom-up globalisation, where the margins claim the world.

There has however been an association of a reverse 'essentialist culture and language' discourse, there those who oppose the West have often done so by exaggerating their own non-Western cultural traits and values (e.g. Asante 2008; Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini 2010; Miike 2008).

'Critical cosmopolitan' discourse

This acknowledges the complexity of cultural realities which might have been unrecognised, marginalised and hidden by Centre-Western images of culture. The notion of culture and cultural practices are negotiable, contestable, socially constructed, and never neutral. We are all able to engage creatively with and take ownership of culture wherever we find it. This discourse is associated with the unmarked experience of everyday life and bottom-up globalisation. In the

academy it has been driven by a postmodern, critical sociology (e.g. Delanty et al 2008; Holliday 2011; King 1991; Kumaravadivelu 2007), often influenced by the social action theory of Max Weber, and critiques all the other discourses.

Discourse conflict

The conflict between the innocent and ideological discourses is expressed in the diagram below, taken from Holliday (2013: 127).
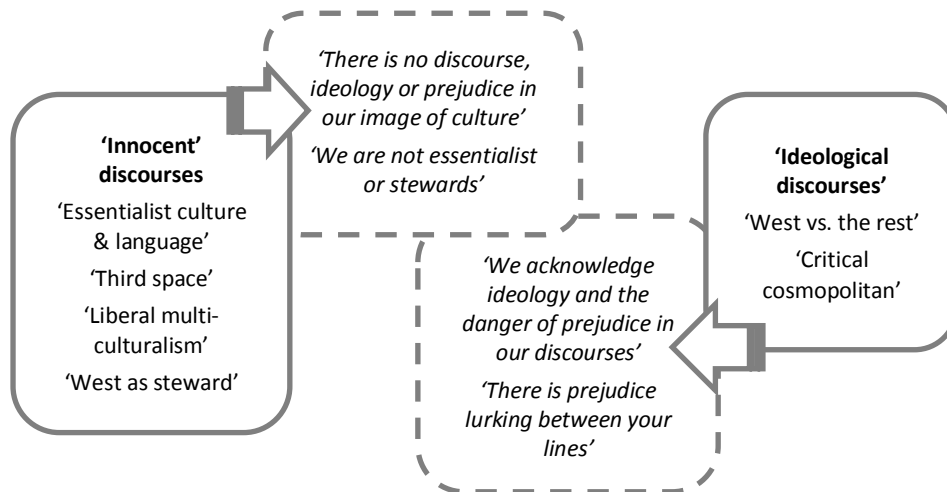
The differences between the innocent and ideological discourses on the left and the right of the diagram respectively will create serious disagreements about whether or not cultural prejudice is present in particular instances of cultural description. Take for example this case, which refers to the Jenna, Bekka and Malee narrative in Holliday (2013: 70):

- o   Bekka suggests that Jenna finds it difficult to have a critical discussion in the classroom because of her culture.
- o   **Interpretation A:** Bekka is reducing Jenna to a stereotype which implies cultural deficiency. It is the same as saying she finds it difficult to have critical discussion in the classroom because of her race, or because of her gender.
- o   **Interpretation B:** This is simply a description of how things are based on what we know about cultural differences. It is evidenced by what people like Jenna often say about themselves and on extensive interview and questionnaire research. Bekka does not have any intention to be culturist and is in fact appreciating Jenna's different cultural origins.

The strength of argument supporting interpretation B indicates how difficult a task it is to establish that there is prejudice embedded in cultural descriptions. The innocent discourses on the left of the figure would claim no interest but that of science and understanding. In effect, they are easy answers and therefore very difficult to shake. (A further discussion of the Jenna, Bekka and Malee will soon be found at http://adrianholliday.com/articles/.)

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