

## **British stereotypes in two humorous collections of postcards: A stylistic examination<sup>(1)</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*The How To Be British Collections* (two booklets each composed of 32 comic postcards and equally comic comments) humorously portray the British showing their supposed national features. A representative sample from the booklets is scrutinised in this article by applying social psychological research on stereotypes with a stylistic approach. The main research purpose is to prove that the British stereotypes in the postcards are normally depicted as positive and those about foreigners and language learners as negative. Hence, the research hypothesis is that British culture and identity are extolled in the booklets, and that the non-British are represented as somehow deficient and flawed, in other words, as the actual grotesque characters in the postcards. Linguistic investigation indeed discloses that the British ethnic, social and cultural superiority over foreigners is implicitly celebrated in the booklets, along with their British protagonists and the appealing national characteristics typifying them. With regard to language learners, they allegedly lack politeness, heritage and the other positive aspects identified by social psychological studies; therefore, they are depicted as involved in ludicrous activities, a representation characterising them as hopelessly foolish and as mentally and even physically faulty.

**Key words** – national-ethnic stereotypes; self-stereotypes; social psychology; stylistics; *The How To Be British Collections*

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### **1. *The How To Be British Collections*: introduction, objectives and methodology**

*The How To Be British Collections* (FORD and LEGON 2003, 2005; henceforth HTBBC 1 and 2) are two booklets each consisting of 32 annotated humorous postcards which depict the British as manifesting their alleged national characteristics and indulging in their supposedly typical activities or, in the authors' words, «which celebrate the traditional values of our reserved, polite, pet-loving, tea-drinking nation – values which have long made Britain “different”» (HTBBC 1: back cover). The British characters are usually portrayed along with a few foreign language learners of unspecified nationality. Both the *Collections* and the individual postcards which compose them are sold mainly in tourist shops throughout Britain and through the Internet, which makes them readily available to a wide international audience.

As can be easily predicted given the humorous genre, the *Collections* are based on and abound in stereotypes, more precisely, in both national-ethnic stereotypes and self-

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stereotypes. Therefore, within the wider framework of studies on stereotypes in language and culture (see Section 2 below; see also MAAS and ARCURI 1996; BARFOOT 1997; HINTON 2000; STANGOR 2000; PICKERING 2006), in this article I analyse several stereotypes included in *The How To Be British Collections*. As mentioned in the introductory paragraph above, the protagonists of the booklets are two diverse and opposing social groups, that is to say, the British and foreign language learners, both of whom are stereotyped in the postcards. Given that these two different groups and categories of stereotypes are examined here, my main research purposes are twofold:

1. To reveal what textual and discursive features are used in the postcards to represent the humorous characters as stereotypically British, but not necessarily as comic figures, thereby also demonstrating that the British stereotypes are commonly sketched as positive, and that the *Collections* ultimately celebrate British culture and identity;
2. To prove that the stereotypes about foreigners are normally negative, and that the postcards depict the non-British, who do not share or even understand British culture and identity, as somehow faulty and deficient, hence as the actual comic figures in the booklets.

In order to achieve these purposes, I apply social psychological research on national-ethnic stereotypes and self-stereotypes (primarily CONDOR 1996, 1997). To be more exact, in the opening paragraphs of the analytical sections composing this article, I briefly summarise and discuss Condor's social psychological field research on British stereotypes and her main findings, viz., the three national features she has recognised as stereotypically British: patriotism, manners and politeness, national history and heritage. In the analysis of manners and behaviour as represented in the postcards (Section 4.3), I also refer to three influential linguistic models of politeness (BROWN and LEVINSON 1987 [1978]; EELLEN 2001; WATTS et al. 2005 [1992]). Afterwards, I examine the stereotypes in the *Collections* adopting a stylistic methodology<sup>2</sup>. More precisely, in each section I try to identify the three British national features in the *Collections* and to scrutinise a sample of postcards; in accordance with the approach of stylistics, I attempt to describe their main linguistic and visual characteristics and to provide an interpretation of their meaning and an evaluation of the authors' message and ideology.

The sample under investigation was principally chosen by taking Condor's field studies and results into consideration and employing them as guidelines in the selection; it therefore consists of postcards displaying various explicit and implicit instances of patriotism, manners and politeness, or national history and heritage. In addition, the sample features both the social groups that are the protagonists of the *Collections*, namely, as mentioned above, the British and foreign language learners. The stereotypical features picked out by Condor can be found scattered throughout all postcards and clearly characterise a fair number of them; moreover, all postcards show either a Briton or a foreigner as the main character being depicted and stereotyped. For these reasons, although not extremely substantial, the sample may be regarded as representative of the *Collections* in these respects.

Because of these constitutive attributes of the sample, Section 3 below is dedicated to British stereotypes, Section 4 to the stereotypes of foreigners and language learners. With regard to the British national features, the entire Section 3 deals with patriotism as

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<sup>2</sup> See LEECH and SHORT 2007 [1981]; JEFFRIES 2010; JEFFRIES and MCINTYRE 2010; BURKE 2014; SIMPSON 2014 [2004]; STOCKWELL and WHITELEY 2014. For stylistic and linguistic investigations of national-ethnic case studies, see VIRDIS 2009 on stereotypes about Sardinia; VIRDIS 2012a on Scottish stereotypes; VIRDIS 2012b [Ch. 10] on Irish stereotypes.

portrayed in a representative postcard. Although one postcard only is analysed in this section, it abounds in visual and, above all, linguistic material suitable for the examination of stereotypes: it actually depicts a group scene with more protagonists and events, accordingly stereotypical properties, than average (see Section 3 below for further information on the scene, its characters and the wide range of stereotypes they convey). Apart from a number of silent figures communicating non-verbally, ten Britons utter a few words each, which hint at such topics as the weather, food and drinks, sport, and which consequently convey several national-ethnic stereotypes openly related to patriotism. In fact, both in Condor's interviews and findings and in the postcards and investigation below, the feeling of devotion to one's country appears to take distinct forms and to be manifested through various activities, states of mind or circumstances which, when taken as a whole, offer an exhaustive representation of and, in the *Collections*, tribute to British national identity.

Further aspects of the many-sided stereotypical quality of patriotism are also discussed in Section 4: the viewpoint being different from, and at the same time complementary to, that in Section 3, new elements of this quality come to the surface. Section 4 actually investigates two postcards on patriotism (Section 4.2), two on politeness (Section 4.3) and two on heritage (Section 4.4). The part of this article devoted to foreigners hence also deals with the three British national features: they indeed seem to fully emerge when the non-British are also, if not mostly, involved and humorously described as a ridiculous touchstone. In fact, as I try to show below, it is when language learners interact with British people and culture that the former are depicted as foolish and their behaviour as absurd, and that the English language is praised as worth studying, British politeness as worth acquiring and British heritage as worth visiting.

## **2. Stereotypes and national-ethnic stereotypes: working definitions**

Scholars from different fields of knowledge – from psychologists to sociologists, from content analysts to discourse analysts, to mention just a few – all define stereotyping as the act of conceptualising a social group on the supposition that all its members have given personal features and personality traits in common. Stereotypes, namely, the resulting depictions, are positive or negative mental representations of the world, agreeable or disagreeable 'pictures in the head' at an individual level and at a shared or cultural level. In other words, they are generally simplistic and overgeneralised ideas founded on such social and cultural variables as age, gender, race, religion and, more relevantly to this article, nationality and ethnicity. They may even be emotionally slanted concepts triggered by partial or mistaken conventionalisations arising from a slight or no direct acquaintance with and understanding of the members of the stereotyped social group (STANGOR and SCHALLER 1996; INSCH 2009; LIPPMANN 2012 [1922]).

Stereotypes are hence both individual beliefs and collective belief systems about members of social groups which not only influence our habits and tastes, but also our judgement, attitude and behaviour towards those members and groups. The process of stereotyping has expectable outcomes: it misleads us into regarding outgroup members not as idiosyncratic individuals, but merely as prototypical and depersonalised representatives of the group they are assumed to belong to, as identical to one another and categorised by the same defining outgroup attributes (HOGG 2009).

The term 'stereotype', with its current meaning, was introduced in the area of social sciences by the American radical journalist W. Lippmann, who deployed it in his book

*Public Opinion* (1922). In a well-known definition, he was also the first to warn that stereotypes were inappropriate conceptualisations of the world, being biased and subjective concepts, ideologically and emotionally marked notions the media fed the general public with:

A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, of our own position and of our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy. (LIPPMANN 2012 [1922]: 52).

Such a cautious note has subsequently been reiterated by other authors, with special regard to the fact that stereotypes are maintained in private but also public life, are elements of common knowledge shared to a high degree in a specific society, and may be embedded in the cultural belief system. In the introductory paragraph to their article, Stangor and Schaller (1996: 4) note that «when stereotypes are consensually shared within a society, their consequences become much more *pernicious*, because they affect entire groups of people in a common way» (*emphasis mine*). In other words, while explaining the nature, properties and essential qualities of this concept for the very first time in their article, these scholars feel it necessary to also highlight the fact that a stereotype, even a positive one, being a more or less irrational and logically groundless view, can be undesirable, damaging or harmful to the person or group who are being stereotyped.

It is not unusual for stereotypes to result in prejudice, or the assumption that a given individual must fit a certain profile merely because s/he is a member of a larger group. This appears to be most conspicuous and resistant to change with national-ethnic stereotypes, which may bring about racial profiling and eventually discrimination (WRIGHT and TAYLOR 2007). From the standpoint of business studies, it has been pointed out by Insch (2009) that «national or country stereotypes describe qualities or associations that are perceived to be closely linked to a nation's population. Studies have demonstrated that national stereotypes can bias the perceptions of management, employees, and customers in decision making». In the business domain, they may hence impact consumer, investor, tourist and migrant decision-making and, in everyday contexts, have such unfavourable outcomes as ignoring or rejecting entire communities along with their character, behaviour and lifestyle. In addition, the stereotypes deployed to depict marginalised ethnic groups show a tendency to be more abusive and defamatory than those alluding to groups with a higher position in the culture: compare, for instance, the (mainly negative) stereotypes of African Americans with the (mainly positive) stereotypes of French Americans in the United States (ELLIGAN 2008).

In their article mentioned above, Stangor and Schaller (1996: 10) also identify cultural approaches to stereotypes as those which «consider the ways that stereotypes are learned, transmitted and changed through indirect sources – information gained from parents, peers, teachers, political and religious leaders, and the mass media», and which consequently «focus explicitly on language as a representation of social groups». Cultural approaches accordingly provide a fruitful link between the social sciences on the one hand, and linguistic and media studies on the other hand.

Since stereotypes and prejudice are transmitted and reproduced through linguistic and semiotic interaction, in modern society most of them, as ready-made cultural products,

are contained in and conveyed and acquired via the mass media and other agents of socialisation, ranging from such standard means of communication as literature and television to less obvious means, for instance, email, leaflets, bumper stickers — and postcards. These various sites of cultural production express dominant voices which are less likely to be descriptive of popular consciousness than prescriptive (CONDOR 1996: 42). Hence, given that all of them are consumable media globally sold, bought and shared by millions, they turn out to be potentially prescriptive and, to return to Stangor and Schaller's concern cited above, pernicious worldwide (VAN DIJK 1987).

### 3. British self-stereotypes: patriotism and national identity

#### 3.1. Introduction

Since the *Collections* include a fair number of national-ethnic stereotypes of the British, and since the authors of the booklets are British themselves, those national-ethnic stereotypes can also be defined and scrutinised as self-stereotypes. In Huntsinger and Sinclair's (2009) terms, «*Self-stereotyping* occurs when individuals' perceptions of their own characteristics correspond to the characteristics attributed to a social group to which they belong (i.e., stereotypes of their group)». In other words, self-stereotyping takes place when we regard ourselves in terms of the prototypical (and prescriptive) qualities of our ingroup, accordingly when we depersonalise ourselves to feel, think and behave prototypically and to conform to ingroup norms (see also self-categorisation theory, HOGG 2009).

Of the functions served by self-stereotyping recognised by recent social psychological thinking, the most salient to emerge from the *Collections* is deploying them as a strategy to create a sense of enhanced identification with one's own group or to generate an enhanced differentiation from other groups. More precisely, «At the intergroup level, self-stereotyping can increase a sense of connection to members of one's own group, thereby creating a sense of group cohesion and solidarity, or decrease the degree to which one's group seems similar to other groups. At the interpersonal level, self-stereotyping can facilitate positive interactions with people who believe group stereotypes to be true» (HUNTSINGER and SINCLAIR 2009). In line with this function, the postcards depicting British stereotypes and their alleged shared ingroup characteristics, even the most parodistic and ludicrous ones, appear to be principally addressed to the British themselves and turn out to be effective group- and solidarity-making (and marking) devices. Foreigners and language learners, instead, may be assumed to be the secondary addressees of these texts when they accept and share national-ethnic stereotypes, that is to say, when they approve of the British being socially distinct and culturally distant from the non-British.

Although the British national-ethnic stereotypes and self-stereotypes of patriotism, manners and politeness, national history and heritage may seem to some as no longer accurately describing the contemporary situation, they were consistently used by the British respondents in Condor's (1996, 1997) social psychological research interviews to define the identity of their own national group as they perceived and represented it. This scholar conducted several studies consisting in asking her respondents questions related to their national identity and self-perception. All of them could be objectively defined as «indigenous English»: they were white, had been born in England of two English parents, were then living in England and had not lived outside the country for any extended length of time.

With regard to their British national identity, «A number of writers have commented on the confusion that people (including academics and government officials) may face concerning the distinctions between the terms “English”, “British” and “UK citizen”» (CONDOR 1996: 42). On the one hand, this seems to be reinforced by the common assumption that the English themselves equate the nationality adjectives ‘English’ and ‘British’ and tend to slip between their usage. On the other hand, such confusion is justified by the comparative lack of authorised public symbols and significant cultural icons of Englishness, i.e., the lack of popular celebration of English national identity as detectable in, for example, a distinctive national costume.

### 3.2. Analysis

In Condor’s (1996: 62) field studies on British self-stereotypes, respondents «regarded “patriotism” and “nationalism” as particularly characteristic of “the English” (and of “the British”). However, this was not a “normative” image in the sense that it constituted a template for English behaviour. Rather, it was discussed as a shameful possibility». One of the causes of patriotism being reckoned to be shameful may be that the British social norm of politeness (see Section 4.3 below) would be infringed by public manifestations of national pride. When discussing British patriotism, Condor (1996: 62) also asserts that «A commonly cited character was the monstrous “lager lout”: the football hooligan or package tourist, toting Union Jack boxer shorts and proclaiming English ethnic superiority». The (partly class-specific) personality traits of this dreaded figure as emerging from this scholar’s interviews are rudeness, prejudice, small-mindedness, ignorance, laziness, patriotism, nationalism; in a word, he represents the «grotesque other» or the «black sheep» of the ingroup (CONDOR 1996: 54).

The figure of the lager lout is visually embodied in the postcard which, among the 64 constituting the two booklets, best testifies to the British characteristic of patriotism. It is headed «Brits Abroad» (HTBBC 2 no. 25), whereas the commentary on it, printed on the page on its left-hand side, is called «Next Year It’s Weston-Super-Mare». In the foreground, the postcard shows five tables of what appears to be an outdoor restaurant on a Mediterranean beach, with one waiter, seven customers and four passersby, whilst at a middle distance, on the right-hand side, a waiter is serving four customers at an outdoor bar. On the beach in the background, a young woman, surrounded by four men, is dancing topless on a table, which causes two police officers to intervene.

Both one character in the foreground and one group of characters in the background incarnate the lager lout. On the right-hand side in the foreground, a middle-aged passerby, with a heart-shaped tattoo on his right arm and a can of beer in his right hand, is wearing a white T-shirt with the following: WE DRANK / [Union Jack] / ALL THE / BEER. On the beach in the background, three of the four men, while loudly cheering the topless woman, are waving their cans or glasses; as is readily inferable from western culture or encyclopaedic knowledge of the world, those cans and glasses are more likely to contain beer or alcoholic drinks than herbal tea.

Whereas the lager lout’s heavy drinking habits and rude-mannered behaviour are incarnated by the figures just sketched, his patriotic ideology, verging on racism, is expressed through nearly all the ten utterances in the scene. From left to right and from top to bottom, they read:

1. [male customer reading a restaurant menu, speaking to himself] I can't understand this — it's all in FOREIGN!
2. A. [male customer, fanning his red face, to female customer] This weather's too hot for me!  
B. [female customer] Well, take your pullover off, then!
3. [male customer to male waiter] What's this? We can't eat THIS! Haven't you got any PIE and CHIPS?
4. [male passerby waving his hands, speaking to himself] Why don't they do something about these flies — they're everywhere!
5. A. [male customer to male passerby] I'll tell you one thing — you can't get a decent CUP of TEA in this place!  
B. [male passerby] Too right! I can't wait to get back HOME!
6. [female customer to another] It feels so weird not knowing what's happened to Sharon in Celebrity Soapsuds!
7. [young hooligan customer to female waiter] 'Ere, do you know the TEST SCORE?
8. [female passerby, feeding cats, to male passerby] Tsk, tsk, Look at these poor pussy cats — how THIN they are!

In the utterances, patriotism and, in Condor's words, the proclamation of English ethnic superiority amplify the distinct aspects of the lager lout. These stereotypes are evoked through several further national stereotypes concerning Britain and the British, namely:

1. The British cannot speak any foreign languages (U1);
2. The British cannot tolerate the weather abroad, particularly the Mediterranean weather (U2A); furthermore, they cannot tolerate the presence of insects, which characterise that climate (U4);
3. The British take their food and drinks to be better than those served abroad (U3, U5A, U5B);
4. The British like watching television, especially soap operas (U6);
5. The British are interested in sport, especially cricket (U7);
6. The British like pets, especially cats (U8);
7. In short, because of these positive traits, Britain is better than all other countries, as a result it is the best country in the world (U5B).

These national qualities are also consistently present and reiterated in a number of postcards throughout the *Collections*<sup>3</sup>, usually in comic and hyperbolic sketches from a visual viewpoint and a verbal viewpoint; because of these grotesque and excessive aspects, they seem to be an implicit manifestation of non-patriotic behaviour (see above) and a performance (or public expression) of the normative British stereotype of politeness and modesty. Nevertheless, although such comic and hyperbolic features are linguistically and non-linguistically foregrounded, the main property of most of the postcards seems to be the fact that they can be read and interpreted in two different, even opposing ways. As Condor (1996: 63) points out,

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., «True Brit» (HTBBC 1.1), «Tea» (1.5), «Pets» (1.21), «Fish and Chips» (1.24), «Entry Test» (2.1), «Cricket» (2.8), «The Full English» (2.9). Since not all postcards have a clear title printed on them, for ease of reference they are referred to by the headings of their commentaries (those appearing on the left-hand pages) and their numbers in the booklets.

possibly as a consequence of the English norm of “manners”, English people may deny feelings of national identity and pride. They may even, on occasions, demonstrate their lack of nationalistic “prejudice” by expressing derogatory attitudes towards their own nation. It is, nevertheless, possible to identify more subtle ways in which, under such circumstances, English people may express notions of national superiority.

The *Collections* in general and this postcard in particular appear to be one of those «subtle ways» and to uncover the «subtle» nature of certain expressions of British patriotism. For example,

1. Although the male customer cannot read the restaurant menu because he cannot speak the local language, it is inferable that that menu is only written in that single language: given that the scene is set on a tourist beach, and given that English, as the language of international tourism, should be also known and used on that beach, this anti-British stereotype becomes the negative stereotype against foreigners who cannot speak English as a global language even when they should (U1);
2. Although the two male figures who complain about the weather and about flies are visually and verbally described as humorous, when excessively hot, not only is the Mediterranean weather unpleasant, but it can also be unhealthy and cause dehydration and faints (U2A); moreover, it favours the proliferation of great numbers of insects, which can be annoying and even harmful (U4);
3. Although it would be impossible to make an unbiased list of the best national-ethnic food and drinks in the world, and although British food and drinks are not globally renowned for their high quality, the fact that the British love their typical meals may signal their wider devotion to other traditional principles and values, such as the family, work and patriotism (U3, U5A, U5B);
4. Although, in the postcard, television is hinted at by two young women who comment on a soap opera (a genre which, incidentally, conveys and reinforces conservative British tenets), this mass medium offers cheap entertainment which can be comfortably enjoyed from home with one’s family and friends (U6);
5. Although the topic of sport is introduced in the postcard by the character of a young hooligan with punk hairstyle, an earring and a dragon-shaped tattoo all over his back, sport, both played and watched, can also be cheap entertainment to enjoy with one’s family and friends; it can also be a social activity which allows one to meet new people with one’s same interests. In addition, for cricket dates back to the sixteenth century, has always been considered a gentleman’s activity, and has meanwhile become the national sport of England, it also suggests the traditional principles and values mentioned above (U7);
6. Although the female passerby who feeds cats is depicted as a grotesque figure, love for animals, in western culture, is normally praised, since it indicates sympathy for all living creatures and a compassionate temperament (U8).

This distinct reading has disclosed that all national stereotypes about the British as portrayed in the postcard, even the negative ones, can be reversed into positive ethnic features, consequently that the message conveyed by this specific postcard, confirmed as it is by the *Collections* as a whole, is deliberately ambiguous. To be more exact, whilst the postcard explicitly communicates, in a humorous and hyperbolic way, that the British hold themselves to be ethnically superior to all other nations, accordingly that they are



the best nation in the world, at the same time the text indirectly expresses the value-laden message that this might actually be the case, and that the British characteristics, worldview and lifestyle are worth extolling and, in that case, following. That is to say, a discursive scrutiny of the postcard has revealed that such deliberate ambiguity is one of those subtle and pervasive communicative strategies which Condor refers to, and which the British successfully employ to implicitly signal their patriotism and national pride. This is also reinforced by the investigation of the characters of the foreign language learners in the following section of this article.

#### 4. Stereotypes of foreigners and language learners

##### 4.1. Introduction

In both *Collections*, the three stereotypically British national features as picked out by Condor (1996, 1997), i.e., patriotism, politeness and heritage, also repeatedly occur in the several postcards which consider the topic of foreign language learners. The two booklets, in fact, include the figures of a number of young people travelling to Britain to study English, who represent – and parody – the context-dependent behaviour and activities of foreigners and the process of language learning.

Such stereotypical representation and parody are explicit for at least two reasons. Firstly, while many more postcards indirectly allude to language teaching and utilise its specialised lexis and phraseology, 11 postcards out of 64 (17%) are headed as follows: «Get around in / ENGLISH / Lesson X / [Title of ‘lesson’, e.g., «How to Complain» (HTBBC 1.6), «How to be Polite» (1.7), «Error Correction» (2.13)]». Secondly, almost all the commentaries on the left-hand side of the postcards comprise and close with two textbook-like sections called «Expressions to learn» and «Avoid saying»; for instance, those regarding «Brits Abroad: Next Year It’s Weston-Super-Mare» read, respectively, «Toasted teacakes and a pot of tea for two, please» and «Val — these good people live just off Darley Drive!», «When in Rome do as the Romans do» and «Travel broadens the mind».

But why have a few foreign language learners of unspecified nationality been comprised in the *Collections*, conceptualised as an undifferentiated social group and stereotyped negatively? As claimed by Insch (2009), the act of stereotyping can be defined as follows:

a mechanism to explain, justify, and exaggerate differences between groups, related to the status or position of a group. The stereotype content of groups with fewer social and economic advantages will contain elements that assist to explain disparities, such as lower employment rates. For example, members of disadvantaged groups might be described negatively and undeservedly as unintelligent or unmotivated as a way of justifying the differences.

In accordance with this definition, the booklets hyperbolically represent the British as a higher-status or advantaged or powerful majority-like group, and foreigners as a lower-status or disadvantaged or powerless minority-like group. Such dissimilarities in position and privileges are not strictly social or economic as in the definition, but primarily cultural and, since English language acquisition is openly involved, intellectual. To be more exact, the sample of postcards contains several elements accounting for such cultural and intellectual distinction or, rather, deficiency of the ‘disadvantaged’ group: the fact that the process of learning a foreign language is generally long and demanding,

and the supposed lack not only of proficiency in English but also of politeness and heritage in the foreigners' own social groups, as is shown below.

#### 4.2. Foreign language learners and British patriotism

Several postcards feature the British aspect of patriotism together with the sketch of a foreign language learner<sup>4</sup>. Among others, postcards HTBBC 1.9 and 1.28 belong to the sub-collection «Get around in ENGLISH», and discuss two particular traits of English phonology and phraseology. As suggested by its heading, the postcard «Get around in / ENGLISH / Lesson Seventy-two / How to Pronounce the **th** sound» (HTBBC 1.9) 'teaches' the correct articulation of the dental fricative. It shows six half-length pictures of an ugly, funny-faced male language learner, each completed with such captions as «1. Place tip of tongue behind top teeth», «2. Breathe out» and, eventually, «6. Consult dentist», as the man spits out all his (false?) teeth.

«Get around in / ENGLISH / Lesson Thirteen / Survival English» (HTBBC 1.28), instead, shows what can be termed the main and most recurring character in both *Collections*, viz., an odd-looking male student, with red hair and a long nose, wearing a black and red hat, a red waistcoat, yellow breeches, white shirt and stockings, black shoes. On an underground train, he hears the set expression «Mind the gap!» and wonders what it means; whilst looking it up in his dictionary or textbook, he finds it out the hard way and falls down in the very gap he should have minded.

The two postcards are a representative sample of those comic texts included in the *Collections* which describe, superficially and roughly, foreign language learners as grotesque and ludicrous figures, both visually and verbally. Their faces in fact look foolish, their bodies unattractive, their clothes strange, in a word, they are depicted not only as physically different from the British who surround them, but also, and mostly, as ideal objects of ridicule. Furthermore, the man in HTBBC 1.9 is visually and verbally portrayed while performing such absurd and useless actions as retracting his tongue (picture 3), vibrating the air behind it (4) and uttering a tongue-twister (5). Whereas this man struggles to learn English phonology, the student in HTBBC 1.28 has difficulty with its phraseology. He does not know the meaning of the very common expression «Mind the gap!» and, moreover, he does not try to discover it in the quickest and most effective way, namely, inducing it from the physical context of the underground, yet he wastes time checking it in his book. The main deficiencies of the two men are hence that not only do both of them not master the English language, but they also study it in a silly and ineffectual way; by extension, the fact that they apply such learning methodology represents their entire personality and stereotypes all foreign language learners as stupid and lacking understanding and common sense.

What also emerges from the textual and discursive analysis of postcards HTBBC 1.9 and 1.28 is the presupposition that the English language is worth studying or, rather, that every single non-native speaker must learn it and become proficient in it. Although its distinctive phonology may classify it as difficult, that same distinctiveness may render it stimulating and fascinating; in addition, the fact that it comprises such phrases as «Mind the gap!» characterises it as sensible, wise and practical. Along with the others in the *Collections*, the two texts therefore indicate that, in order to achieve that paramount goal,

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., «Top Tongue» (HTBBC 1.10), «Test Your English» (1.17), «Grammar Rules, OK?» (2.13), «The Ins and Outs of It» (2.14).

students must be ready to make such sacrifices as acquiring a new linguistic system dissimilar from that in their native language, doing regular exercises and homework, spending time in Britain, travelling throughout that country and conforming to British socio-cultural conventions. In the textual and discursive context of the *Collections*, consequently, the activity of blaming foreign language learners is turned into a celebration of the English language and British culture as a whole, that is to say, into an expression of patriotism and of national pride.

#### 4.3. Foreign language learners and British politeness

Condor (1996: 62) observes that, in her field research, «If “patriotism” is regarded as a monstrous possibility, “manners” and “politeness” are regarded as positive (although possibly archaic and slightly humorous) aspects of English National Character. “Manners” are, of course, associated with norms of social performance». In order to analyse two postcards featuring linguistic and visual instances of appropriate manners and normative sociocultural behaviour as stereotypically conceptualised in the *Collections*, of the several theories of politeness put forward and described in the literature in the last few decades (for an overview, see PIZZICONI 2006), I briefly mention and deploy Brown and Levinson’s (1987 [1978]) pragmatic model and the two social constructivist models developed by Watts et al. (2005 [1992]) and Eelen (2001). Although so different that the latter theories question the abstract and universal concept of the social and linguistic phenomenon of politeness hypothesised by the former, all three approaches seem to be equally useful here to examine the various aspects of politeness in the postcards from their distinct perspectives.

In Brown and Levinson’s (1987 [1978]: 5) model, politeness is seen as a rational, even deliberately planned, element of sociocultural interaction determined by given norms and principles; its primary purpose is social cohesion, to be achieved by means of the preservation of the social face of all participants in the conversation. The abstract notion of ‘face’ is understood as a twofold need. On the one hand, negative face is the self’s and the other’s need to be independent, to show and be shown deference and respect, and is typified by expressions of apology for the imposition undertaken, such as request or order; on the other hand, positive face is the self’s need to be connected to the other and the tendency to show solidarity and friendliness (BROWN and LEVINSON 1987 [1978]: 61-65). In the *Collections*, the two types of politeness are both recurrent<sup>5</sup>. The two postcards investigated in this section are actually founded on negative politeness, which is usually praised in the booklets and even dedicated the front cover of the first; positive politeness, instead, is sometimes characterised as inappropriate<sup>6</sup>.

Although the categorisation into negative and positive politeness appears to be helpful, Watts et al.’s (2005 [1992]) theory is seemingly more pertinent to the scrutiny of the specific realisations of politeness included in the postcards. These scholars in fact recognise two incomparable notions of politeness. On the one hand, politeness<sub>1</sub>, or first-order politeness, originates from folk, common-sense and popular concepts of good and bad manners, that is to say, from everyday communication and social processes. On the

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., «Terms of Endearment» (HTBBC 1.13), «One’s Own Trumpet» (2.20), «The Thought That Counts» (2.22), «Ta-ta For Now» (2.31).

<sup>6</sup> The cover of HTBBC 1 is a reprint of the postcard «Politeness» (1.7); for a negative representation of positive politeness, see the young man in «Arrival» (HTBBC 1.2), who begs money from a foreigner and utters «Wotcha, mate! How are ye diddling? Blooming brass monkey weather, innit, eh? Say, how are you fixed for the odd bob or two ...?».

other hand, politeness<sub>2</sub>, or second-order politeness, is a scientific concept utilised in specialised academic and sociolinguistic discourse (WATTS et al. 2005 [1992]: xix-xxii; the very possibility of a theory of politeness<sub>2</sub> is subsequently rejected by the more radical position adopted by WATTS 2003: 11). Since, as mentioned, the *Collections* are not a learned or sophisticated medium, such as, e.g., poetry, but a popular mass medium rich in cultural stereotypes, and since the wide circulation of these stereotypes is apparently confirmed by Condor's social psychological research, the booklets can be safely assumed to be linguistic and visual examples of politeness<sub>1</sub>, therefore to emerge from such everyday activities as socialisation and interaction practices.

Among the numbers of postcards which sketch foreign language learners dealing with British politeness, HTBBC 1.8 and 1.16 are particularly notable. The former features the student with the black and red hat together with another frequent character in the *Collections*, i.e., an elderly man with a black bowler hat. The postcard is visually divided into two halves, both including a header, half-length pictures of the two protagonists and an utterance by the learner between them. In the top half, headed «My English When I Arrived Here», the worried student says «Speak slowly, I don't can good understand» to the frowning man; in the bottom half, entitled «My English Now (£5000 later)», both the student and the man smile as the former utters «Speak slowly, *please*, I don't can good understand».

Postcard HTBBC 1.16 is «Lesson Forty-four / How to Start a Conversation» in the sub-collection «Get around in ENGLISH». It shows three «conversation starters», from the Elementary «It's a nice day today, isn't it?» and the Intermediate «Bit of a cold wind today, isn't there? Looks like we're in for some rain later», up to the six-line long, weather-forecast-like Advanced, beginning «A trough of low pressure is sweeping down from south-east Iceland». The «conversation starters» are addressed by three smiling learners to three equally smiling Britons. At the bottom of the postcard, a footnote advises: «Don't worry if you can't understand their reply — just keep smiling!», and presents the half-length pictures of an elderly woman uttering «Tourists like you are ruining this place!», and of the learner with the black and red hat replying «Yes, it is, isn't it?».

HTBBC 1.8 and 1.16 accordingly show everyday social and interactional instances of Watts et al.'s politeness<sub>1</sub>, which reinforce the visual and verbal contents and value system of the two postcards analysed in Section 4.2 above. The ludicrous-looking student proves to be ignorant of the English language and its rules at various linguistic levels, viz., at least syntactic (HTBBC 1.8) and pragmatic (1.16). Furthermore, all his efforts are of no avail. In HTBBC 1.8, he is described as having spent a considerable sum of money (see also Note 8), not to mention time and energy, merely on being taught the correct use of optative 'please', which is usually easy to learn, being virtually obligatory in polite requests. In HTBBC 1.16, he unquestioningly takes the advice in his 'lesson' and keeps smiling at the angry woman, but he does not take into account either the paralinguistic signal of the tone of her voice, or the non-linguistic signals of the expression on her face and of her finger pointing at him. The two postcards hence add a new negative quality to the depiction of the foreign language learner, both as an individual figure and a personification of a member of a given social group: he is also portrayed as gullible, namely, so easily cheated and duped as to mindlessly observe all the 'rules' in his textbooks and, especially, to carelessly put his mental and financial resources into a pointless language course or a fruitless stay in Britain.

As mentioned above, one of the most foregrounded presuppositions about the British national character which emerges from the two postcards is the interpersonal and conversational importance of politeness, more precisely politeness<sub>1</sub>. Of the three types of

politeness, identified by Eelen (2001: 35), viz., expressive, classificatory and metapragmatic politeness, the most conspicuous in the two postcards is expressive politeness, or the type conveyed by instances of speech where participants aim at explicitly producing polite, often formulaic, language in order to adopt a respectful stance to the hearer. In HTBBC 1.8 and 1.16, expressive politeness is vividly exemplified by the emphasis laid on two linguistic features: the obligatory employment of ‘please’, and starting a conversation by talking about such an everyday but value-neutral topic as the weather. The implicit ‘lesson’ to the foreign language learner is therefore to avoid conflict potentially triggered by personal requests and value-laden conversational subjects.

The classificatory and metapragmatic types of the phenomenon are also present in the two postcards. Classificatory politeness, expressed by the hearer’s spontaneous evaluation of and comments on the speaker’s linguistic behaviour as polite or impolite, is visually signalled by the elderly man in HTBBC 1.8, first frowning then smiling, and the three smiling Britons in 1.16, that is to say, by the characters in the *Collections*. Metapragmatic politeness, or the type dealing with the nature and significance of the phenomenon, is instead conveyed by the authors of the booklets to their readers by means of both the postcards and the commentaries on their left-hand side.

Therefore, like the representation of the English language considered in Section 4.2 above, this sketch of politeness – its being equivalent to good manners and the introduction to its benefits and successful results – has the function of categorising social identities and groups, constructing social realities and enacting actions of social and cultural inclusion or exclusion (EELLEN 2001: 237). Since the two social identities shaped and evaluated by the *Collections* are conflictual, this practice generates a dual effect. On the one hand, the social group of foreign students is described as flawed, because they need to acquire British politeness along with the English language and manners in order to be judged positively and win social and cultural approval in Britain. On the other hand, given that this phenomenon is conceptualised as innate in the British social group by the verbal and visual folk representations in the postcards and the commentaries, the *Collections* pay a new tribute to British national identity.

#### 4.4. Foreign language learners and the British heritage trope

In her research interviews, when Condor (1997) asked her British respondents to describe their nation, the most common theme to emerge was the idea that the British people and country «had history». National history was actually mentioned by almost three quarters of all interviewees and given a central role in their reports, being often the first attribute of their country to be hinted at. The respondents did not normally engage in chronological narratives or in lists of particular historical events or deeds. Instead, «their references to national history took the form of reified accounts in which “history” and “the past” were presented as objects “owned” by the nation» (CONDOR 1997: 223), or concretised in architecture and in visible sites throughout the country. In this scholar’s definition, this form of representation as if from the visual perspective of an external voyeur can be termed a «heritage trope».

The heritage trope is also present in the *Collections*<sup>7</sup>, where it concurrently occurs with the topic of foreigners and language learners mainly in postcards HTBBC 1.29 and

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., «Cap and Gown» (HTBBC 2.12), «Essential Kings and Queens» (2.16), «Peers of Our Realm» (2.17), «London» (2.27).

1.31. In the former, a young couple of tourists with guidebook and rucksack visits a town of medieval appearance, with such shop- and roadsigns as «ANTIQUES», «Ye Olde Traditional CREAM TEAS», «HISTORIC RUINS», to mention just a few at random. When the young man asks «Excuse me, is there anything **new** to see around here?», the five adults in the street, two children and a dog are all horrified and shocked, and a man covers a boy's ears.

In postcard HTBBC 1.31, headed «Britain's Top Tourist Attractions», the student with the black and red hat is shown in four different settings. In the first, entitled «Castles», he spends £15 to visit a tower, whereas in the second («Cathedrals») the increasingly concerned young man buys a souvenir guide for £25 and, in the third («Colleges»), a T-shirt for £49.99; eventually, in the fourth and final setting («Cashpoints»), whilst he is attempting to withdraw some money from an ATM, where he is queuing with a few other foreigners, the machine displays the notice «NO WAY!».

The heritage trope as conceptualised in the two postcards is conveyed by means of a reification device, that is to say, national history is represented as if it were a currently visible presence or entity physically embodied in medieval towns, castles and churches (CONDOR 1997: 223-224). Such a conceptualisation, along with nostalgic discourses, is also prominent in media representation of the national heritage and in tourism discourse; in fact, it is a present trend recognised by tourism studies: «local and national stereotypes and heritage are redeployed to give hotels and destinations a unique selling point» (BELL 2012: 29).

As a result, the two postcards, on the one hand, reinforce the stereotypical characteristics of foreigners and language learners as expressed in the four texts examined above and, on the other hand, present at least two new negative aspects involving the heritage trope. Firstly, both students and tourists are depicted as impatient to travel throughout Britain and to visit the country's heritage. This confirms Condor's respondents' answers to her research interviews. As she argues, «the people who took part in my study often presented “our” history as a feature which distinguishes “our nation” from others, and fantasized “other” nationals as the envious voyeurs of the fact and extent of “our” national history» (CONDOR 1997: 226); this is because they explicitly or implicitly paid tribute to the belief that the British nation has more or a longer reified history than foreign nations. Since, according to this scholar's interviewees, «history» and «the past» can be concretised into material objects, students and tourists alike believe that they can also possess that history and that past by buying souvenirs of the British places they have visited. However, as if by way of revenge, they are effortlessly tricked into spending money on expensive and not particularly helpful objects (see also a notice on a board in HTBBC 1.29: «GOOD OLD FASHIONED ENGLISH FOOD / AT UP-TO-DATE PRICES»)⁸.

Secondly, despite their curiosity and attempts to learn, foreigners as a social group are portrayed as ignorant of several basic facts, for example that a number of well-known monuments and sites of cultural interest in Britain, such as Stonehenge, are so ancient that they date back to prehistoric times, i.e., even pre-date the British nation proper

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⁸ The representation of financial exploitation also makes a case for the greediness of British tourist institutions, language schools and hosts: see also «Speak Slowly» (HTBBC 1.8, scrutinised in Section 4.3), «Real English» (HTBBC 1.18, depicting the odd-looking student and his host writing a letter to the former's father and asking him to 'please [sic] send more money soon'), «The Bathroom» (1.19, where the student is reading inside a piece of bathroom furniture labelled «Guest room (overspill)»), «Heavenly Hosts» (1.22, portraying two students and the host's husband doing the drying up in chains). In these postcards, the foreigners' gullibility and British exploitation appear to be mutually dependant. Nevertheless, language learners are usually, if not always, described as silly and somewhat stupid whoever they interact with; such a frequent description seems to confirm that foolishness is deliberately represented as one of the foreigners' main personality traits in the entire *Collections*.

(CONDOR 1997: 226). Since foreigners are unaware of such details, they cannot fully experience sightseeing in the country, or interpret and appreciate its national history and architecture, even less participate in the feelings of admiration for and contemplation of those sites which, accordingly, are indirectly described and celebrated as one of the most noteworthy traits and achievements of British culture and national greatness.

## 5. Conclusions

The stylistic examination of the representative postcards from *The How To Be British Collections* has firstly disclosed that the results of the social psychological field research carried out by Condor (1996, 1997) using the interview mode are confirmed in the mass medium of these postcards in the different semiotic forms specific to this medium. More precisely, her findings that her British respondents take themselves and their fellow nationals to be characterised by the cultural stereotypes of patriotism, manners and politeness, national history and heritage not only are linguistically and non-linguistically present in the *Collections*, but also typify them as a whole. Secondly, and more relevantly to the main objectives of this article as mentioned in Section 1 above, this textual and discursive investigation has uncovered a number of details about the national-ethnic stereotypes and the self-stereotypes which the booklets are based on, and about the ways they are verbally and visually communicated.

At a first reading, the national stereotypes and the self-stereotypes about the British, viz., patriotism, politeness and heritage, seem to be depicted as humorous and hyperbolic, and the British characters in the postcards as equally ludicrous. Yet, further reading and scrutiny of the same texts reveal that the comic message about the British and their clichéd qualities is ambiguous and admits more than one interpretation, the most likely being that those postcards, with their protagonists and their positive national features, implicitly praise the ethnic, social and cultural superiority of the British over foreigners and language learners. The latter figures, lacking as they are in politeness, heritage and other positive characteristics, are portrayed as physically and mentally faulty, and engaged in foolish pursuits which typify them as hopelessly silly. Given that the national group of the British alone is extolled and represented as a role model for others, and given that every other non-British national group, great and small, is sketched as deficient, although the *Collections* are explicitly grotesque and exaggerated texts, when reading them, it would be worth bearing in mind the concern shared by the several scholars quoted above about the potentially pernicious consequences of cultural stereotypes.

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