

British Culture, British Values (from “Understanding Britain” by Karen Hewitt)

How the British Feel and Think. Pragmatism and Privacy

I will try to say something about British culture and values.

The first point is that I am *tentative*. The British distrust big statements. They believe that big statements are not about ordinary human beings, and therefore they are either *not true* or they lead to *tyranny* and disaster.

The second point is that I am more comfortable when thinking about *English* culture, because there is difference between the values and attitudes of England and the much smaller countries, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These three countries have a sense of their Celtic heritage expressed in its myths and legends. Welsh is still a flourishing, living Celtic language. In the sparsely occupied areas of the Scottish western highlands and islands one can find plenty of evidence of ancient Celtic culture. More significant has been the succession of Scottish philosophers, sociologists, economists, natural scientists, politicians, explorers, writers and engineers who have played great part in the history of the United Kingdom.

The English distrust generalizations. They like details and examples which provide evidence and explanation. I suggest that the English seem to like defining themselves as members of small groups which they have, as individuals, helped to create.

We are sometimes described as a nation of amateurs, but the English have no objection to it; consider our enthusiasm for creating and enjoying small groups.

The English (and the Scots) are culturally *pragmatic*. For us “being pragmatic” means recognizing the real complications of a situation, and working out the best way of dealing with them. In life, what works in one case will often not work in another. For this reason we are suspicious of theories: we want to see evidence, examples, analogies. “How do you know?” seems to us a very sensible question. It is typical of this culture that our great scientist is Darwin who constructed his theory of evolution out of thousands of little pieces of evidence that we can all examine. In a curious way, Darwin’s explanation of the origin of species was an amateur activity.

If you compare us with Americans, you will find that they are taught daily to speak of “the American people” in a public language that is positive, and to talk about themselves as individuals in language which is quite lacking in irony. In England, we find it extremely awkward to talk about ourselves except ironically. And towards other people, circumlocutions are almost essential.

We resist orders just as we resist trying to order other people to do things. So instead of “Sit down please” I might say, “Would you like to sit down?” or “Why don’t you try that chair which is more comfortable than it looks”. Each sentence is shaped to allow the other person to say, “Thank you but I don’t want to sit down”. In any situation the person should be offered a polite way to refuse the proposal.

Why do we use language this way? Because the English are trained from an early age to judge and assess social responses. This is perhaps the most difficult characteristic to explain because it is so deep-rooted as to be instinctive. From babyhood, English children are taught that other people want their privacy. “Other people do not want to hear about your plans or your unhappiness. It is fine for the family to know, but you should not “impose” yourself on other people”. So the English hesitate to talk to people whom we do not know until we are sure that they want to talk to us. If two or three people with this rule somewhere deep in their minds meet and do not know each other, they may be silent for a long time!

Nobody is going to say, “You must not behave like that!” Part of our training is not to impose on other people *even when we think they are behaving bizarrely or stupidly*. So this explains the other observed truth about England – that we tolerate eccentrics, difficult people, nonconformists in social behavior. Indeed we do.

This culture of emotional privacy also leads to strong resistance to leaders – or anyone else who tells us what to do.

The English are not a very hospitable nation. I believe the reason is closely allied with the previous discussion. “If I invite someone to my home, he or she may want to refuse. How can I help them to avoid accepting my invitation? Well, the simplest way is not to ask in the first place.”

Social inhibitions do not mean that we all try to behave in the same way when we are in public. If other people’s personal space should be respected, so should ours.

And yet – cultures do change. The stereotype of the reserved Englishman and Englishwoman is in so many ways out of date. In recent decades we have absorbed cultural assumptions from other ethnic groups such as street carnivals, open-air eating and drinking, greater public expressions of emotion – in sport, in grieving at death, and in reporting the disasters.

Furthermore, although our privacy is recognized in law, our own commitment to it has been seriously challenged. What is odd is that the British have enthusiastically adopted CCTV cameras all over the country. The cameras are sometimes helpful in capturing criminals, but at the same time they mean that it is possible to trace the movements of almost anyone at any time in an urban environment. So perhaps our culture of privacy is changing radically.

Active vocabulary

statement – утверждение;

values – ценности;

attitude – позиция, отношение;

heritage – наследие;

evidence – очевидность; основание; свидетельство;

awkward – неловкий;

impose (on) – навязывать(ся) кому-то.

Questions

1. *What parts of Great Britain are strongly influenced by Celtic heritage?*
2. *What does “being pragmatic” mean for the English?*
3. *What does the idea of “privacy” imply when we speak of English values?*
4. *Why do the English speak about themselves ironically? What kind of philosophy is this irony based on?*
5. *What changes and challenges have taken place in British values and principles recently?*

Tolerance and Fairness

If you ask the English themselves what they think are typical “English” values, they will talk, with some hesitation and embarrassment, about tolerance and fairness. When we began to receive immigrants in large numbers from different parts of the world, we complained, as people do everywhere, of their unEnglish habits. But because of our belief in being tolerant, it was much easier to accustom ourselves to their oddities: we could not think of any reason why they should not have their own food, or parties or strange habits.

The other quality on which we pride ourselves is our desire to be fair. Our decisions about financing universities, our attitude to health rationing, our worries about the presumed innocence of defendants are based on issues of fairness. Governments always justify policies by saying they are trying to be fair.

Fairness is a value which sees individuals in their relationship to other individuals in society. It does not encourage people to think alike, nor does it encourage each individual to assert himself or herself. Instead it goes along with that sense that other people have a right to their own lives, to be themselves.

Foreigners in England can find themselves very bewildered and forlorn because people leave them alone. Unless you know them already, approaching individuals does not work very well for all the reasons outlined above. Look for groups, associations, classes, campaigns which might interest you, you will quickly find the other side of the English – the lively, liberated, enthusiastic, slightly crazy side to English life.

Active vocabulary

embarrassment – смущение;

to accustom – приучать;

oddity – странность, чуждаковатость; чуждак, оригинал;

presumed innocence – презумпция невиновности;

to assert – утверждать.

Questions

1. *What are the examples of fairness as a basic principle of social activity in Britain?*
2. *What is the way for the foreigner to feel more at home among the English?*

English Humour

The English are notoriously slow to get involved in serious conversations. But once they started, you will find their talk very difficult to follow. Serious analysis of a problem or a detailed account of personal life is always filtered through humorous, self-deprecating irony. Such irony is utterly confusing for foreigners; we share a distinctive sense of the absurdity of life which simply does not seem funny to most people. English humor is not a matter of jokes or anecdotes, but a way of looking at the world and undermining its threats and cruelty through our self-mocking sentence constructions that come as naturally as talking itself.

On the one hand you can say that such pervasive irony demonstrates that the English are not serious. They are always sliding away from “The Truth”. On the other hand you can say that they are deeply serious: in every sentence they are acknowledging that life is more complicated than any statement about it. Is that serious or not serious? This is also why the English love Chekhov. Is he serious or not serious? I have heard Russians puzzling over Chekhov’s refusal to state his position except in enigmatic ways that cannot be pinned down. Chekhovian humour is close to English humor.

The experiences of Russians who are familiar with English, even those who live in England, show that it takes a long, long time to understand this approach to life. For us, of course, there is no problem unless, as happens with some people, we are born tone-deaf to the language of a culture. I do not want to suggest that the English all laugh at the same jokes or that we all enjoy the same comic programmes. Just as in other cultures there are ranges of humour which are highly entertaining to people with one level of education, and other ranges of humour which are very funny to those with another level of education. The BBC offers a wide range of comedies, comic shows and comic presenters on our television and radio programmes, but though they embody our sense of humour they cannot define it.

English humour is a way of seeing the world which is so embedded in our idioms and expressions, so easy yet unobtrusive, that foreigners, including Russians, all too often take the literal meaning to be the real meaning. Meanwhile we are communicating among ourselves, oblivious to your puzzlement.

Active vocabulary

self-deprecating – умаляющий собственное достоинство;
to mock – насмехаться; передразнивать;
pervasive – распространяющийся, проникающий;

tone-deaf – лишенный музыкального слуха;
range – ряд, линия, цепь; область интересов;
to embed – вставлять; внедрять, насаждать;
unobtrusive – ненавязчивый, скромный;
oblivious – не замечающий, не обращающий внимания.

Questions

1. *Why don't the English like "serious conversations"?*
2. *Why do the English like Chekov's works?*
3. *What kind of approach to life shapes English humour?*
4. *Why is it difficult for the Russians to understand English jokes?*