

Translation, Cultural Knowledge and Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

The article suggests that translation can be a suitable activity to explore and develop aspects of foreign language students' intercultural competence. This point is illustrated with a study into the translation processes of British university students of German. As the study indicates, cultural knowledge problems impinged on the students' translation performance in various ways. Thus, frequently students did not seem to be sufficiently familiar with concepts of their native culture and with German standard terminology for British concepts. Furthermore, decisions as to whether German readers would comprehend transferred English terms were regularly based on a bilingual dictionary. This led to the transference of items which would probably be obscure for a fair proportion of German readers. Based on a discussion of these problems some suggestions for foreign language teaching practice are made.

Keywords: Translation, intercultural competence, cultural knowledge, German, English, linguistic equivalence

1. Introduction

For some 25 years intercultural competence has been a fashionable, much-quoted and influential concept in language education. Thus, a recent EU study conducted in thirteen European Countries found that "considerable attention is given to the development of intercultural competence in classroom practice, which appears to be aligned with the position of intercultural competence as specified within the different curricula" (Franklin2007:50). Byram and Risager, who have published widely on intercultural competence in language education, suggest that the competence learners need for successful intercultural communication is

one which enables them to bring the two cultures and cultural identities present in the interaction into a relationship of communication. The foreign-speaker must be able to perceive and understand the culture(s) of the native-speaker, to reflect on his/her own culture(s) as seen from the foreign perspective, and to relate one to the other, explain each in terms of the other, accepting that conflicting perceptions are not always reconcilable. (1999: 65f.)

According to Byram and Risager this competence should enable the learner to become "a mediator between cultures", which is essential from a communicative point of view since "it is the mediation which allows for effective communication" (1999: 58). In other words, the ability to mediate between two cultures is an essential component of intercultural competence.

Considering this aspect of intercultural competence, one task which draws heavily on students' intercultural competence is communicative translation. If translation is regarded as an act of communication in which a text produced for readers in one particular context is rendered for readers in another, students need to take on the role of intercultural mediators. First, they need to relate source and target culture in order to identify culture-specificity in the source text. Subsequently, they have to try and explain one culture in terms of the other when seeking a communicatively satisfactory mediating position for cultural divergences.

Consequently, learners' performance in communicative translation tasks can yield valuable insights into their approach to intercultural issues and the specific problems they encounter. Some of these problems

were discovered in a study which explored the translation behaviour of British university students of German when translating culture-specific lexis. In the following section the study will first be described. Subsequently, some of the findings will be presented and possible implications for teaching practice will be pointed out.

At this point it seems important to acknowledge that the notion of "national culture", as for instance put forward by Hofstede (1980) has been repeatedly criticised (cf. McSweeney2002). Admittedly, the concept is highly problematic as it seems to purport that there are beliefs, values, assumptions and knowledge universally shared by all members of a community within neatly defined political borders. Such a generalising assumption of uniformity within the territory of a state clearly does little justice to the diversity, ambivalence and extreme variation which can and usually will exist between the people of the same nationality or indeed within any other group considered to be sharing a culture. At the same time, for the purpose of cultural investigation it is necessary to draw – to a certain extent – arbitrary lines around groups of people who can reasonably be expected to share knowledge, behavioural patterns, values and the like. In the given study, terms such as "British culture", "British cultural references" or "the students' native (i.e. British) culture" are not meant to refer to a definite, easily identifiable cultural system, which is universally shared amongst all people of British nationality. Rather, they refer to a basic assumption of this paper that there exists some degree of cohesion amongst the majority of "British people" which is brought about by the use of a common language, experience or knowledge of particular institutions, exposure to the same climate, access to the same media etc.

2. Description of the study

As part of a larger study nineteen students of a British university (B₁ to B₁₉, English native speakers), who were either in their final year of a B.A. in German or had recently finished their degree, were asked to translate, in writing, an English article featuring a high frequency of British cultural references (CRs) for publication in the well-known German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*. The students were further instructed to think aloud while translating, i.e. to verbalize any thought that came to mind and any problem they had (introspection). Directly after the think-aloud task, all participants were additionally questioned about their approach to translating individual cultural references in the task (retrospection). Thus, the data to be analysed consisted of the students' written translations and the transcripts of their think-aloud as well as retrospective reports. In a follow-up to the think-aloud study some additional data were collected to explore the use of translation in the students' educational context (primarily source texts; cf. section 4.2).

The source text to be translated had been adapted from a broadsheet newspaper article (see appendix), and provided a good sample of British cultural references with subject areas ranging from politics (e.g. "House of Lords", "Tory") through law (e.g. "QCs", "barrister"), education (e.g. "public school", "Oxbridge") and history (e.g. "Victorian") to geographical terms (e.g. "Home Counties", "Kensington").

As search of the Guardians' online archives (available via <http://www.guardian.co.uk>) suggested, the items varied considerably in frequency of occurrence with more frequent CRs registering in excess of 8000 hits ("house of lords" [8785], "solicitor" [8868], "Tory" [34266]) while the least frequent items occurred below 1000 times ("inns of court" [108], "Lord Mayor" [693], all searches conducted 10.09.2008). The majority of items, however, occurred more than 1000 times in the archives, suggesting that the CRs were commonly used and not obscure as a result of their "exotic" status in the source culture. Due to the focus of the article on the upper and upper middle strata of British society, many CRs pertain to the respective social levels. However, it was assumed that most of referents were sufficiently well-known to have penetrated all social levels to some extent. For instance, the renowned department store "Harrods" was believed to be so famous that it would be known even to the majority of people who would not consider patronising it.

For the identification of cultural references the researcher relied essentially on the following definition provided by Aixelá:

Those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever the problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different

intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text. (1996: 58; italics in the original)

The study made use of the introspective research method of thinking aloud, since it has proved to be a valuable tool to get at least some access to the thought processes contributing to translation products (cf. Jääskeläinen (2002) for an overview of think-aloud studies into the translation process). Even though verbal protocol data can and often will be incomplete in that thoughts may not be reported for various reasons, the procedure gave significant insights into how the students approached the translation of the cultural references, which would have remained undetected in a purely product-based analysis. As the study was interested in the translation procedures the students would consider best rather than those they would adopt due to a lack of lexical or cultural knowledge, they were provided with several dictionaries, of which an unabridged Collins bilingual dictionary and a dictionary of British culture were consulted most frequently.

In the following sections, some findings of the study will now be presented which appeared related in that they all reflected cultural knowledge problems of some sort.

3. Findings

3.1. Lack of source-culture knowledge

As the text was fraught with cultural references, source-culture knowledge, i.e. knowledge about the British concepts in the source text, clearly played an important role in the students' translation process. Two different types of source-culture knowledge problems were distinguished. The first category comprises all instances where students had a comprehension problem of which they were aware ("overt source-culture knowledge problem"). The second group contains all CR translations where students already had or arrived at a wrong meaning hypothesis, but did not appear to be aware of it ("covert source-culture knowledge problem"). The knowledge problems were identified on the basis of the following criteria:

- *An overt source-culture knowledge problem* was assumed to have been involved in the translation of a CR, if at least one of the following occurred:
 - a student states at any point of the process that s/he is uncertain about the meaning of the CR or any aspect of its meaning relevant to its translation; a student reports any such problem during the retrospection;
 - a student uses the dictionary of British culture¹ in order to establish or confirm a meaning hypothesis;
 - a student states a wrong meaning hypothesis, which is later in the process corrected;
- *A covert source-culture knowledge problem* was assumed to have been involved in a CR translation, if at least one of the following occurred:
 - a student forms a wrong meaning hypothesis during the thinking aloud, which is not corrected or reveals a wrong meaning hypothesis during the retrospection;
 - a student's written translation shows a clear misunderstanding of the CR, even though no comprehension problem was reported;

Surprisingly, roughly one fifth of the cultural references in the text caused overt or covert comprehension problems for the British students, which means that on average the translation of six CRs involved a source-culture knowledge problem. For instance, 26% of the students were uncertain about the meaning of "Oxbridge" or misinterpreted the item. This figure rises to 47% for the CR "Whitehall", to 63% in the

case of "City of London" and to more than 70% for "QCs" and "Inns of Court". The items that caused most comprehension problems were "Clubland" and "Corporation" (both 84%). While the students were not expected to always have a clear idea about relatively complex concepts such as "the Inns of Court", it was astonishing to regularly detect complete lack of knowledge. For instance, in the case of "Inns of Court" most of the students who had comprehension problems appeared to have come across the term for the first time. Student B₈ declared that she had "never heard of them [her]self", as did participants B₁₅ and B₁₄. Others reported that they had no idea what the term referred to, indicating the absence of even a vague concept. This complete absence of knowledge did not only occur for relatively rare and complex expressions, but also for items which were believed to be more well-known. Student B₁₇ reported that she had never come across the term "Home Counties" before, and three other students stated frankly that they did not know what "it" was. Similarly, students B₁₉ and B₁₇ said that they did not know the term "Whitehall" while participant B₁₅ remembered the process thus:

first of all it made me think of White House and that's obviously America... and then [after looking up "Whitehall" in *Collins*] I don't think anyone in England really refers to the British government as Whitehall... I don't know if we really say that

Even though the above are only examples and cannot be used as a basis for generalisation about the students' knowledge of their native culture, they suggest that insufficient familiarity of native-culture concepts can be a significant problem in translation. As one has to bear in mind, the CRs in the given text were not selected for their complexity or obscurity, but occurred "naturally" in an authentic, non-specialised article in a broadsheet paper. The degree of miscomprehension or simple lack of understanding by graduate or near-graduate native speakers was therefore rather unexpected.

An interesting group of comprehension problems were those instances where students believed they had understood a cultural reference whereas in fact their translation was based on a wrong meaning hypothesis (covert source-culture knowledge problems). For instance, the term "Clubland" posed problems, which were rooted in the ambivalence of the word "club" in its traditional sense referring to exclusive gentlemen's clubs and its more recent meaning denoting a night-club. Apparently misled by the latter meaning eight of the students (42%) believed that the term "Clubland" in the source text referred to an area bustling with nightlife. This misinterpretation occurred even though several of the students consulted the dictionary of British culture, which defined "Clubland" as an area with many clubs. Clearly, the students believed they had understood the meaning of "club" and, consequently, did not check the cross-referenced entry of "club" directly above "Clubland", which would have clarified its intended meaning. Significantly, the fact that students had misinterpreted the CR was not always obvious from their written translations. In fact, only one third of the written translations made the misunderstanding obvious (e.g. "'Clubland', das berühmte Disco Gebiet Londons" [Clubland, London's famous nightlife district]). In the other cases students used translations such as "Klubviertel" [club quarter], as suggested by the bilingual dictionary, or simply transferred "Clubland", which would have made it impossible for a marker to identify the comprehension problem. This underlines the importance of the think-aloud and retrospective data, without which the wrong meaning hypothesis of the students would not have been detected. The item "City of London" posed a similar problem with six students believing that "City of London" referred to the city as a whole, which led to mistranslations such as "die Hauptstadt London" (the capital London) or "die Stadt London" (the city of London).

What is remarkable about these misinterpretations is the fact that the students on almost no occasion seemed to be concerned about the fact that the assumed meaning made little sense in the given text. Thus, none of the students seemed to notice the obvious clash between the phrase "solid base in tradition" and the relatively modern activity of "clubbing". Similarly, none of the students misinterpreting "City of London" appeared to wonder what the connection was between "tradition", "institutions" and London as a whole. This seems to indicate that context only played a limited role in the comprehension and translation process of the students. Apparently, the students approached CRs not so much as a part of a text, but as isolated language items, which were dealt with on an individual basis.

3.2. Target-culture knowledge problems

Compared to the frequent and grave problems caused by lack of source-culture knowledge, comments indicating target-culture knowledge problems were rare: only fifteen remarks suggested that students had an overt target-culture knowledge problem. In these comments clarification was mainly sought in relation to legal terms with students attempting to delineate the German concept of "Rechtsanwalt" (lawyer) as opposed to that of "solicitor" or "barrister". The fact that comments referring to lack of target-culture knowledge were rare was assumed to be mainly related to the nature of the text and the task. Since the text dealt with the students' native culture and the translation brief did not call for extreme shifts towards the target culture (e.g. by requiring the substitution of British CRs with target-culture equivalents), the students appeared to mainly operate within a source-culture framework or the common ground occupied by both cultures.

While overt target-culture knowledge problems seemed rare, the phrase "old professions" seemed to cause covert target-culture knowledge problems in 13 instances (68%), because students did not appear to be aware of the culture-specific differences between the German term "Berufe" and "the professions". In the case of "old professions" the translation problem has two culture-specific facets, one of which stems from different lexical segmentation in German and English. The standard translation for "profession" given in bilingual dictionaries is usually the term "Beruf", which is more comprehensive than the English expression and includes any kind of occupation which requires training, regardless of status and type of qualification. German, however, lacks a single word denoting occupations of a higher status. The second aspect of culture specificity are the connotations of "old professions" in the given text, which are deeply rooted in British society and therefore difficult to convey in German. Thus, the term "old professions" in English is linked closely with the well-educated middle classes and an old-established social hierarchy, which is not captured by the connotatively neutral "Beruf".

Most of the students, however, put "alte Berufe" either in a form of automatic substitution or after consulting the bilingual dictionary. In the interviews subsequent to the think-aloud translation all but one student who had put "alte Berufe" gave the impression that they assumed there to be full equivalence between "Berufe" and "professions". Unfortunately, the translation "alte Berufe" appears somewhat awkward in the given context since the German phrase seems more likely to refer to old trades such as cobblers, bakers or saddlers than traditional academic professions. Thus, search of the online corpus of the German Language Institute (IDS) in Mannheim (available at <http://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web/>) suggests strongly that "alte Berufe" would not be associated with traditional academic professions by German readers. The corpus contains more than three billion running words and comprises various newspapers and magazines in the German language. The item "alte Berufe" registers more than thirty hits, none of which refer to academic professions. Typically, excerpts found in the corpus focus on old trades which have all but died out: "alte Berufe wie Schmied und Schleiferei" [old trades such as blacksmiths and grinders] or "alte Berufe wie Wagner, Sattler, Hufschmied" [old trades such as wainwright, saddler, farrier]. This suggests that the students' rendering could easily evoke inappropriate connotations in German readers.

3.3. Insufficient knowledge of German terminology for British concepts

As pointed out by Newmark (1988), certain referent types such as well-known political institutions, book and film titles, or geographical terms tend to have standardised translations in other languages. Thus, normally "Kanzlerin Angela Merkel" will be rendered in English as "the (German) Chancellor Angela Merkel" and the German state "Nordrhein-Westfalen" as "North Rhine-Westphalia".

In the given text a number of CRs had translations which could be considered as standard translations. Overall, these standard solutions seemed to be little known by the students, as frequent use of the bilingual dictionary for these items suggests. While it was unsurprising that none of the students appeared to know a relatively uncommon term like "Kronanwalt" [*crown lawyer] for "QC", the apparent lack of target-language terminology for more frequent source-culture terms was unexpected. Thus, fourteen students (74%) had to look up the standard translation for "Victorian" (viktorianisch), only one of the students (5%) seemed to actively know the standard translation for "House of Lords" (britisches Oberhaus) and none seemed to be aware of the German translation for "county" (Grafschaft). Some of the students also seemed to have no passive knowledge of the terms, since they expressed uncertainty about the correctness of the standard expressions provided by the bilingual dictionary. For

instance, student B₁ looked up "House of Lords", saying she hoped the provided solution would "ring a bell", but then frankly admitted that she had never heard the term "Oberhaus" (upper house) before.

Geographical terms also caused problems with eight students looking up "Wales", unaware that the term is usually transferred unaltered into German. Most strikingly, the students also displayed insufficient knowledge of target-language terminology with regard to the item "Britain": three of the students chose to look up "Britain" in the bilingual dictionary, because they could not think of a suitable rendering; one of these students selected the potentially problematic solution "Britannien", ignoring information in the dictionary that the term has become dated; students B₉ and B₁₉ simply transferred "Britain", stating in the retrospection that this procedure had been automatic and that they had not been thinking anything in particular; finally, more than 60% of the students, who used the German standard translation "Großbritannien", spelled it incorrectly as "Groß Britanien", "Großbrittanien", "Großbritanien" or "Grossbritanien".

While it is impossible to deduce from such a small sample of CRs with standard translations the extent to which the students were familiar with standard terminology, the fact that many students did not seem to know relatively common terms indicates that there may have been little awareness of German standard terminology for British concepts.

3.4. Consideration of readership's source-culture knowledge

As expected, students seemed to have difficulties assessing the extent to which individual CRs would be known by German readers. As the think-aloud data suggests, decisions as to whether a CR can be transferred into the German target text appeared to be based on two main strategies. Less frequently, the decision seemed to be derived from the students' personal experience in German-speaking countries, as in the following examples:

High life... got to be in there [looks up "high life" in *Collins*]... oh, joy... it is... oh, but it's in English... [laughs]... I don't know about leaving that in English there... I've never heard that... I don't think I've heard that in Germany

[looks up "barrister" in *Collins*]... I'm not gonna put "Barrister"... although that's down here... I haven't actually heard that used in German

Much more frequently, however, decisions as to whether a CR would be understood and accepted by German readers appeared to be based on the solutions provided by the bilingual dictionary. On ninety-one occasions students transferred CRs without explanation because the procedure had been suggested in the dictionary. Thirty-six of these instances were accompanied by comments indicating that students assumed transferred CRs in the bilingual dictionary would be known in Germany, as in the following examples:

[retrospection, student B₁] the first word, it was "Whitehall" in the thingy [bilingual dictionary]... I don't go by first words, I often look through, but if I'm not sure of it and it does say "Whitehall" or it does say that word first without any... much explanation in between, it implies that they know

[think aloud, student B₇] [looks up "peer" in *Collins*] "Peer"... for "peer" they put the same thing... so actually that means that Germans know what it is

Thirteen other students seemed to agree with student B₇ above and also transferred "peer" into their German target texts as suggested in the bilingual dictionary. The assumption that the item would probably be known in Germany, however, is not supported by corpus analysis. Thus, analysis of the IDS corpus of the German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* (years 1997-99), which addresses an educated readership similar to *Der Spiegel*, registers 16 hits for the item "peers", referring to members of the

British upper house. In basically all instances the item is unambiguously contextualised or explained as in the following example:

Derzeit gehören dem House of Lords 635 "Hereditary Peers" (Erbadelige) und 505 "Life Peers" ... an

Currently, the House of Lords comprises 635 "hereditary peers" (hereditary titles) and 505 "life peers".

In a similar vein, the online archive of the German newspaper *Die Zeit* (available at: <http://www.zeit.de/archiv/index>) reveals only a single hit for "peer" for the period 2000 to 2007, in which the phrase "life peers" is succeeded by the explanatory phrase "Lords auf Lebenszeit" [Lords for their lifetime]. As this suggests, the item "Peer" on its own in a German text may cause comprehension problems for at least some German readers.

Reliance on the bilingual dictionary regularly seemed to lead students towards more exotic solutions than they had originally intended. For instance, when translating the item "Tory" student B₈ first reflected: "best to write it in English and afterwards write 'Tory' – 'conservative'". Later, she transferred "Tory" into the text without clarification and reported during the retrospection she had done so "only because I looked it up in the dictionary and it said "Tory" – "Tory", that is the translation for it". Thus, dependency on the bilingual dictionary seems likely to have contributed to instances of transference, many of which seemed potentially problematic on two grounds. First, the bilingual dictionary sometimes suggested the transference of CRs, which, even though they can of course theoretically be transferred, would probably be obscure to German readers unless unambiguously contextualised. Second, many transferred items seemed problematic because their relatively exotic nature could give them undue communicative weight in a German text.

For example, in the source text the item "barristers" appears in a sentence which provides an example of the high number of top professionals working in London: "For instance, half to two thirds of all solicitors and barristers in England and Wales work in London [...]". In the source text, this sentence primarily serves illustrative purposes. Any translation focusing a German reader's attention on the foreign concept of barrister would therefore seem inappropriate. Nevertheless, two thirds of the students transferred the item, after finding "Barrister" in the dictionary alongside the German near-equivalent "Rechtsanwalt".

The above indicates that the students' reliance on the bilingual dictionary contributed to solutions, which probably would have been marked by undue communicative weight because of their "foreign-ness" and a degree of obscurity for a fair number of German readers. The students showed a tendency to adopt ready-made dictionary solutions, but rarely appeared to be critically aware that bilingual dictionaries can only suggest possible solutions, which – especially in the case of cultural references – may often not be appropriate.

4. Discussion

The students' difficulties related to the translation of culture-specific lexis indicate problematic aspects of the students' intercultural competence. Even though the problems occurred in a translation task, it does not seem unlikely that similar problems could equally affect other communicative scenarios involving culture-bound lexis. The following sections will therefore make some suggestions as to how the individual problems could be approached and hence the students' intercultural competence enhanced.

4.1. Lack of source-culture knowledge

Perhaps most surprisingly, the students seemed to lack familiarity with some of their native culture concepts and, consequently, had difficulty rendering them for German readers. As it seemed, at least some of the students did not partake in certain discourses within their culture and hence lacked familiarity with related concepts, which – especially from the perspective of a cultural outsider (e.g. German) – belong to their national cultural inventory. The fact that language graduates due to their linguistic competence may be expected to mediate in contexts requiring substantial knowledge of discourses, which are basically from within their native culture but nevertheless little known to them, is a

problem, which cannot be solved within a foreign language program. Indeed, as Viaggio points out with reference to translation students, "the institution cannot hope to 'teach' all the knowledge of the world" (1992: 310). Similarly, Pisek (1997), who also observes that lack of cultural knowledge tends to constitute a translation problem for tertiary-level language students, argues convincingly that there are obvious limitations on what can be conveyed within a classroom setting.

What language classes however can do, is raise students' awareness that knowledge of their own culture is always limited and that intercultural communication may require them to get a much broader and deeper knowledge base of their own culture than they would normally need within their "domestic" discourses. Hence, language classes should aim to equip learners with the skills needed to identify relevant reference sources about their own culture and to exploit them adequately for communication in the foreign language.

4.2. Insufficient knowledge of German source-culture terminology

As reported, students often did not seem to be aware of standard source-culture terminology in German with participants looking up terms as common as "House of Lords", "county", "Wales", or even "Britain". A possible factor which may have contributed to this apparent unfamiliarity with common source-culture terminology in German was discovered when 103 source texts were analysed which had been used in the students' translation classes (participants in the study were asked to provide teaching material which had been used in their translation classes). As a survey of these texts suggests, the vast majority of source texts for translation both from and into German dealt with Germany or were located in German-speaking settings.

Presumably, texts with "German content" were selected to provide the students with information about Germany and to familiarise them with a British perspective on German affairs. The importance of these objectives cannot be called into question, but, as one needs to be aware, a strong focus on the foreign culture also means that the students are only rarely confronted with their own culture in translation tasks. This could explain why many of the British participants in the study did not appear to be familiar with German standard terms for common British concepts. Considering that an important aspect of intercultural competence is the ability to explain one's own culture in terms of the other (cf. introduction), the use of source texts which deal with the students' own rather than the foreign culture may be beneficial.

4.3. Consideration of readership's source-culture knowledge

The finding that the British students seemed to have difficulty assessing whether specific CRs would be known by German readers was not entirely unexpected: even German native speakers may in many cases be unsure about what a German audience can be expected to understand. What appears problematic about the students' approach, however, is the almost total reliance on the bilingual dictionary to determine what German readers would probably know.

Instruction therefore first of all needs to raise students' awareness that the context-free solutions for CRs in the bilingual dictionary cannot always readily be fitted into any target text. Rather, students have to be encouraged to exercise extreme caution where transference is suggested in the bilingual dictionary and to assess carefully the necessity of introducing relatively foreign items into their texts. Furthermore, where appropriate and available, students should also be encouraged to make use of online corpora in the foreign language, which can provide valuable examples as to how individual foreign items are usually dealt with in the target culture.

5. Conclusion

The study suggests that translation can be a useful tool to uncover deficiencies in students' intercultural competence. It can also be used to raise awareness of issues in intercultural communication and in this way enhance their competence. In the article some translation problems related to cultural knowledge have been discussed, which illustrate that intercultural competence can depend just as much on knowledge about one's native culture and how it is linguistically represented in the foreign language as it does on an understanding of the foreign culture. Therefore, language teachers need to anticipate that

learners may not be sufficiently familiar with cultural items belonging to their own wider cultural context to deal with them appropriately in tasks requiring mediation.

Appendix

Text used in the think-aloud translation

Britain's new super class

Britain has a new upper class: the "super class", a highly-paid elite, which is built on old professions and institutions. Being British, they have a solid base in tradition, whether in Oxbridge, Clubland, the Inns of Court, the House of Lords, or the City of London with its medieval Corporation and Lord Mayor. On the other hand, the super class is a new phenomenon originating from the reforms that were a product of Thatcherism in the 1980s. Like the Victorian factory owners and hereditary peers, this class has come to believe in the justice of its wealth and status.

The lives of the new class revolve around Harrods and Kensington; the best public schools; modern art; the Royal Opera; and the high-life in London, where much of the super class is concentrated. For instance, half to two thirds of all solicitors and barristers in England and Wales work in London, as do 85 percent of all QCs.

This concentration in London has two main effects. First, most of the elite's economic weight is exerted at the heart of the nation, ensuring it strong clout with Whitehall - regardless of whether the government is Tory or New Labour. Secondly, it enables the super class to separate itself from most of the country. Britain beyond the Home Counties barely features on its horizon.

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