

DISCOURSE AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES:

***Have you heard the news?...Tipton...Taliban
and Truth...abandoned in search of a story.
The construction of Us...Them...and The
Others.***

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This assignment looked at the presentation of a news report called 'Eye On The Midlands' featured in a Central News broadcast on 29/ 1/ 02. The report was on three suspected Taliban fighters, arrested in Afghanistan and found to be from Tipton in the West Midlands. I looked at the discourse used in the reports presentation, its representation of the suspects, the people and the town of Tipton and also, the 'positioning' that the people involved in the report and we as viewers were placed in due to the style of the presentation. The scope of investigation this news article offered included visual representation as well as the construction of the text. My point was that the news report suggested three identities – **us** (Central News and its viewers), **them** (the people of Tipton) and then **the others** (the local Asian community).

I applied Norman Fairclough's theories of critical discourse analysis on how language constructs identities and also Stuart Hall's theories on visual representation of 'us' and 'others' as my main sources of reference, although others will feature as well.

The type of language used in news programmes, documentaries and social/political affairs etc, has been termed by Fairclough (1995) as "public affairs media" (1).

The introduction of the report was presented from Central News studios, by female presenter Llewela Bailey. She stood to the left of a large screen that

showed revolving images of the suspects, it concluded with the words 'Eye On The Midlands'.

She was serious in her presentation, business like. As I pressed the record button on my video recorder I missed the opening seconds, so the recorded comments start as: -

"...Tipton Taliban. Three men from the town have been held by the Americans in Cuba, accused of links with Afghan terrorists. The Black Country town has suddenly found itself in the spotlight. Our first 'Eye On The Midlands' report looks at how the people of Tipton are reacting to the extraordinary developments there. The reporter is Keith Wilkinson" (2).

Her comments accompanied the revolving images on the screen. It is the opening statement that introduces the viewer to the topic of the report; something Fairclough (1995) calls "declarative sentences" (3). They tell us what had happened (the story) and what the 'Eye On The Midlands' report is going to feature. Identities are presented to us in this opening clip. For example '*Three men*' establishes the fact that the suspects are male. It makes no direct reference to the men's ethnicity but does offer a subtle reference with the title '*Tipton Taliban*' and '*Afghan terrorists*'. These '*extraordinary developments*' (suggesting the story is almost unbelievable), in order to be taken seriously by the viewers, needs to be presented to us with a recognizable authoritative figure. Fairclough (1995) states, "The reporter is projected as a figure of authority" (4). But, I would also suggest that Central News subtly tried to establish a certain moral high ground by having female presenter Llewela Bailey (dressed in pink, a colour

associated with femininity) make that opening statement. I suggest that it sets Central News up as 'above the antics' of what they are about to report on from their news region. It is after all - a story about suspected 'local' – 'men...terrorists'. This investigation of the opening statement shows the subtle complexities involved in representations and identities. Hall (1997) comments "Representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with 'difference', it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way" (5).

The film report opened with footage of a wall with graffiti on it. It then showed the wall with the graffiti removed. We then saw council workmen cleaning the graffiti off the wall with a large detergent spray gun. Continuity editing allows the footage to flow with a voice over from the reporter. The graffiti included a painting of an aircraft flying towards two tower blocks with the words 'The Base of Terror' alongside it. The reporter Keith Wilkinson's narrative is: -

"Now you see it, now you don't. Today the men from the council cleaned up Tipton's image. No longer can you view the graffiti that describes the town as 'The Base of Terror'." (6).

The first interesting representation I'd like to look at is the combination of the images of the workmen cleaning the graffiti off the wall, and Keith Wilkinson's comments '*...the men from the council cleaned up Tipton's image*'. The image of the men firing spray guns at the wall has connotations of 'fighting terrorism'. The remaining piece of graffiti visible to us is of the word 'Terror'. The accompanying

comment from Wilkinson is of the council 'men' cleaning up Tipton's image. The men doing the cleaning are all white. The visual images that are presented assist the representation and communication of a message. Images have what Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) describe as: -

“...resources for constituting and maintaining another kind of interaction, the interaction between the producer and the viewer of the image...two kinds of participants, represented participants (the people, the places and the things depicted in images), and interactive participants (the people who communicate with each other through images, the producers and viewers of images),” (7).

I suggest that the combination of slight disbelief in the tone of Keith Wilkinson's voice during the opening lines of his narrative, and the irony of the use of the words 'cleaned up Tipton's image' have not been lost. 'White men' - 'cleaning up' a (though small) predominantly 'Asian area' of Tipton in the 'Black Country'! A 'clean' image I would suggest offers connotations of being a white image. This is the beginning of the us and the others representation. Us being the white local/Tipton population and the Central News viewers, the others being the black/local Muslim/Asian population in Wilkinson's report. But, as well as this I also suggest there is a subtle definition and difference depicted in the representation of Central News and its viewers (us), and the representation of the white people of Tipton (who I shall term as them). Also the report is quite detrimental in its representation of the town, as I will highlight in this next section.

Footage from Wilkinson's report showed us the iron engraved archway over the subway at Tipton's railway station, with the word 'Tipton' as a centre focus. The camera then panned down to the reporter (head and shoulders shot) standing with a microphone in his hand beneath the arch. He comments: -

"Tipton has long been the subject of many a Black Country joke and once again it's getting the type of publicity it could do without."⁽⁸⁾.

The whole sentence is very detrimental to the town and people of Tipton, without any explanation given for his statement. From Wilkinson's comments, representation of the town is of it being 'a joke' – not serious, stupid things happen here, etc, and he use's the words '*once again it's getting the type of publicity it could do without.*' I found this whole sentence particularly offensive. I leave myself open to the accusation of 'bias', because I come from Tipton, but I offer this evidence. Wilkinson offers no explanation or evidence of the town 'long being', '*the subject of many a Black Country joke*' or past evidence of the town '*once again getting the type of publicity it could do without.*' A lot of publicity and imagery that is distributed about Tipton is to do with its industrial heritage and the part it played during the industrial revolution. It's 'heavy industry past' at the heart of 'The Black Country', (hence Wilkinson himself standing under the iron cast archway across the subway entrance). The town has its problems but no more or less than Dudley or West Bromwich for example. Wilkinson starts to construct a representation of the 'meaning' of their report. His comments, I suggest, present this 'unbelievable story' as only being able to happen in 'stupid Tipton'. This I suggest places 'subtly' some distance between Central News (and its viewers)

and the 'white' people of Tipton. So representing Central News + viewers as (us), the white people of Tipton as (them) and the Asian community of Tipton as (the others).

At the end of his report he signs off with the following comment "*Joke or not it'll be a long time before Tipton gets over its new found notoriety. Keith Wilkinson,*

Central News" (9). What was the town's 'old notoriety'? The constructed representation of the town and the people in this report, contrasts sharply in comparison to the representation constructed during a visit from local historian Dr Karl Chinn a few weeks earlier. It featured in a *Midlands Today* news item on local history and heritage, obviously a totally different style of news item to the *Central News* report. The constructed imagery of the town and people in this was one of cheery, hard working, 'salt of the earth' people, living in a rejuvenated very proud town' etc. Lots of footage of historical interest sites with renovated buildings and new (private) housing estates and business parks. A totally different construction to what was presented in the *Central News* report.

Central News featured a lot of aerial shots of rooftops of houses, council estates etc, taken from a distance and edited into the report, suggesting a small community – almost Coronation St. They never showed any of the new housing estates. In the last five years alone and just a short walking distance from the shopping area of Owen St, three new (private) housing estates have been built with average prices of £90,000 per house. They instead filmed rows of terraced houses or Council estates to represent the town as 'typical working class.' They grouped the whole town in what Fairclough (1989) describes as a 'social strata'

(10).

I'll now move on to a section of the news report from the market area of Owen St in Tipton. We see three continuity shots of Owen St Market in the small shopping centre. Keith Wilkinson's narrative is: -

"And on market day there was only one topic of conversation. What should happen to the local men suspected of fighting for the Taliban"⁽¹¹⁾.

That this was the *'one topic of conversation'* the whole of Tipton was talking about is a vastly generalized comment to make, and untrue. There's a change also in the representation of the suspects with the use of the verb *'fighting'*. The three men are now suspected of *'...fighting for the Taliban'*. At the beginning they were *'...accused of links with Afghan terrorists'*. This comment from Keith Wilkinson overlaps onto footage of an old white lady (quite forlorn) who is shopping. Keith Wilkinson then adds: -

"This blunt view was quite typical"⁽¹²⁾. We then hear the old woman say (in a broad Tipton/ Black Country dialect, that I suggest would be hard for people not of the region to understand, and therefore represents a 'difference' between Tipton and Central News and its viewers), *"They oughta' (ought to) bloody shoot the lot of em"*⁽¹³⁾. She then walks away. Central News, I suggest, use her views and 'her appearance' in the construction of representation of Tipton and the people of the town. The choice of words for Wilkinson's sentence construction is very interesting. The word 'blunt' for example, to quote the Oxford Dictionary (1984) means, "lacking sharp edge or point, not sharp; dull, insensitive; outspoken, abrupt." ⁽¹⁴⁾. Wilkinson's use of it sets Tipton and its people up as the

same, especially with the lady's comment (and its, I would suggest underlying racism) and broad dialect. The journalists select these words to make their 'ideological case'. As Fairclough (1989) states "ideology is pervasively present in language" (15).

The footage then shows us an aerial view of Tipton from either an airplane or helicopter. Keith Wilkinson's narrative accompanies this: -

"Last night 97% of Central News viewers in a poll said the Tipton men should be put on trial in America"(16).

We get a subtle difference in the representation of the 'attitude' of Central News viewers compared to the people of Tipton. Although they voted 'overwhelmingly' for the men to stand trial in America because of perceived 'harsher' sentencing there, they voted for the men to be 'put on trial...' which constructs them I suggest as being more civilized than the people of Tipton, whose 'blunt' view was constructed as 'bloody shoot em'. There is an ideological link in the two views but also I would argue sufficient difference.

We then see two more shots of the market area. Keith Wilkinson comments: -

"Here we found the same views in the market. Nearly every single person saying British Justice will be too soft" (17). Again he generalizes on the 'views' without

backing it up with actual evidence. In fact not one of the following featured responses from the market place mentions anything about 'British Justice'. In his authoritative role as presenter he sets us up as viewers to receive a 'constructed representation' via editing of the news report. We see a close up shot of a white

male (un-named) around late 30's / early 40's. We hear Keith Wilkinson ask him *"If they're found guilty what do you think an appropriate punishment?"* (18). He answers – *"Life or even death"*(19). His inclusion is to represent another generation of Tipton's community. He is actually a market stallholder on the market and lives in Dudley, but the viewers are not given this information. Neither does the footage show him as a market stallholder. Continuity editing then shows us a close up shot of a female around the same age group (she happens to be the stallholders wife); again the viewers are not given this information. She comments *"Well it doesn't matter whether your black or white. If you support what happened in September you're still a terrorist and you deserve to be dealt with harshly"*(20). No one here actually mentions that the men should be put on trial in America because British Justice would be too soft if they are guilty. The female has a strong Black Country dialect. Interestingly she actually brings 'identity' into the report. She uses the words - *'black or white'*, she uses the word *'terrorist'* to describe anyone who supports what happened in New York on September 11th 2001. I suggest that her colloquialism enables the news team to bring a sense of solidarity of condemnation to the report, from all sides. We are set up as viewers to receive the *'same views in the market'* as the Central News poll, when in fact they are different. The female's comments I suggest, are also presented as 'common-sense' responses. Fairclough (1995) commented on the use of both colloquial vocabulary and common sense assumptions by the media. He states: -

“...use of colloquial vocabulary...has both ideational and interpersonal functions: it draws upon a particular representation of the social reality in question, but at the same time the newspaper, by using it, implicitly claims co-membership, with the audience, of the world of ordinary life and experience from which it is drawn, and a relationship of solidarity between newspaper and audience.”(21).

On the use of ‘common sense assumptions’ Fairclough (1989) states, “Such assumptions are ideologies. Ideologies are closely linked to power...they are a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power... Ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behaviour” (22).

I'll now move onto the representation of the local Asian community. Footage showed a rooftop view of Tipton and Keith Wilkinson's narrative tells us. *“But for many who know the so called ‘Tipton Taliban’ there's a totally different view”* (23). We then see Asian shopkeeper Sadarhat Khan in his shop. My first point is that his name appears on screen with the words ‘Tipton shopkeeper’ underneath. This categorizes him but it's also somewhat stereotypical representation one could suggest. I would like to make the point that Sadarhat speaks with a defined Asian accent - he sounds foreign. The choice of Sadarhat as ‘representative’ of the local Asian community is ironic. There are two newsagent shops within twenty yards of the market place where Keith Wilkinson was interviewing people. They are owned by people from the local Asian community who speak with a

local dialect; yet the 'representation' of the local Asian community is of foreigners with 'foreign accents'. Their constructed representation is as **others**. Sadarhat comments, *"Everyone believes how that England is national justice and they will be dealt with fairly here"*⁽²⁴⁾. He has an opposing view and also his 'accented comments' in a sentence construction that is grammatically poor, strongly represents his identity as being foreign. Another interesting example of representation of **other** is when the footage returns to the workers cleaning the graffiti off the wall. The word 'Terror' is still visible. Keith Wilkinson comments, *"As for the 'Terror' based graffiti, well that was just a silly joke by local youngsters, nothing political intended said the near by shopkeeper"*⁽²⁵⁾.

The footage cuts back to Sadarhat Khan in his shop. He comments, *"Is just stupid little kids in it, it's just they've got nothing else to do so they might as well make jokes out of these serious things which er' a lot of people catch up to and er' portray them as serious things"*⁽²⁶⁾. Someone speaking in a distinct foreign language is heard in the background while Sadarhat is on screen. This is very significant and adds to the representation of the 'foreign / **other**', it subtly helps to define it as 'foreign', both in its representation of another viewpoint and also in its representation of 'not being the view' of Central News and its viewers, nor of the 'constructed representation' of the white people of Tipton.

Wilkinson responds with, *"So it was just a joke?"*⁽²⁷⁾. He implies in the tone of his voice that if it's a joke then it's in bad taste. Sadarhat Khan replies, *"To them it was yes, the kids yes. I mean I don't see it as a joke"*⁽²⁸⁾.

The word 'joke' has featured frequently throughout this report. It has been used by the 'authoritative presenter' and by the constructed representatives of identity in the report. Its use I would suggest is ironic. Meanings of the word 'joke' given in the Oxford Dictionary (1984) include "ridiculous circumstances, person etc," (29). These meanings, I suggest, certainly flavour *Central News'* representation of events, the people and the town of Tipton as being 'of bad taste'. A publicity stunt by a local pub owner sees Wilkinson refer to 'bad taste' - "*At the famous Tipton 'Pie Factory' pub they've put up a sign saying 'This is not Camp X-Ray'. It's not in bad taste say's the owner*"(30).

To conclude:

The news report being from my hometown obviously added to my interest in it. The 29th of January 2002 when the news report was broadcast was a Tuesday night. The story on the arrested men broke on Sunday afternoon (27th Jan). *Central News* had been interviewing people in Tipton since the Sunday evening. As I commented earlier, I was offended by the constructed representation of identity involved in the report. It's basic '**us** and **others**' construction, but also its subtle differencing of Tipton to the '**us**' camp, a differencing that I termed as Tipton being '**them**'. Stuart Hall (1997) states, "Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place...giving cultures their unique meaning and identity" (31). Such a thing as a 'Tipton Taliban' would have disturbed the order of things i.e. Tipton should not have a Taliban, it's of a different cultural category and so becomes what Llewela Bailey termed an '*extraordinary development*'.

The report constructs three identities. *Central News* and its viewers as being upstanding law abiding citizens, the 'white people of Tipton and the town in general as being a bit of an embarrassment, silly, uneducated, of low social class etc, and the Asian community of Tipton as being foreigners who are suspected of supporting terrorist atrocities against the west.

When language construction and imagery are combined in discourse, the power of 'representation of identity' is doubled...and to quote the old media motto...

'Never let the truth get in the way of a good story'!

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