

## IS A WHOLE BRITISHNESS POSSIBLE IN BRITAIN?

Ayşe SEVİMLİ\*

### Abstract

*The aim of this study is to reveal whether a whole Britishness is possible in Britain. This paper explains the reasons of why a whole Britishness is not possible. It offers three reasons for this impossibility. The first one is shown as Multi-nationality as there are Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland other than England. The second one is shown as Multi-ethnic minorities as there are migrants from other countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh and the last one is shown as multilingualism as there are different kinds of languages beside different kinds of accents and dialects.*

**Keywords:** Britishness, Multi-nationality, Multi-ethnic minorities, multilingualism.

## TAM BİR İNGİLİZLİLİK MÜMKÜN MÜDÜR?

### Özet

*Bu çalışmanın amacı birçok çeşitliliğe sahip olan Britanya gibi bir adada tam bir İngilizliliğin mümkün olup olmadığını ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bu çalışma İngilizliliğin neden mümkün olmadığını sebeplerini açıklamaktadır. Bu imkansızlık için üç sebep sunmaktadır. İlk sebep İngiltere'nin yanında, İskoçya, Galler, ve Kuzey İrlanda olduğu için çok ulusluluk olarak gösterilmektedir. İkinci sebep Pakistan, Hindistan ve Bangladeş gibi ülkelerden göçmenler aldığı için çoklu etnik azınlıklar olarak gösterilmektedir ve son sebep olarak da çok farklı dil türlerinde aksan ve lehçe barındırıldığından çok dillilik gösterilmektedir.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** İngilizlik, Çok ulusluluk, etnik azınlıklar, çok dillilik.

---

\* Instructor, Hakkari University, School Of Foreign Languages, [aysesevimli@hakkari.edu.tr](mailto:aysesevimli@hakkari.edu.tr)

### **Is a Whole Britishness possible in Britain?**

Britishness is a concept that is mostly used to describe people as *British* as they are living under the frame of Britain. It is a concept which accepts most of the people as *British* just because they are living in the boundaries of Britain. Britishness is mostly about shared values of tolerance and respect as well as it is a belief in freedom and democracy. The definition of Britishness is a complex issue since states that contain more than one nation can be called unstable. When it is looked at history, it can be seen that Britain starts its first dissolution with the Act of Union of 1800 as Ireland comes to stage of Britain in this period. In fact, this process has a previous stage as England and Scotland has a unification in 1707. According to historians, there is a short moment of Britishness just between 1939 and 1970 since Britain stays as sole Britain at that period. After that period it can be talked about the death of Britain since a strengthened British unionism occurs (Ward, 2004). Even if the abolishment of Britain actualizes, it is hard to describe or accept most of the people as *British* in Britain since there are also other national identities and ethnic minorities whose histories, languages, cultures, religions, and customs are different from each other. In this respect, a whole Britishness cannot be possible in Britain since there are also other people, beside its natives, whose national qualities and values are different from each other. This paper is going to be about the reasons of why a whole Britishness cannot be possible on an island like Britain that shelters lots of diversities in its body.

A whole Britishness is not possible in Britain since Britain is the island of different nations. Britain is not made up only of England, but also is made up of other countries like Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although these nations also dwell in Britain, they are not completely called as *British* since being a citizen in Britain is not in the same meaning with accepting its national identity (Gamble, Wright, 2009). Living there does not make one of these nation a real *British* since Britishness is mostly related with the identification of Britain. Parekh Bhikhu (2009) claims about this issue that “Mere residence does not make one British. Even the formal status of being its citizen is not enough [to be a British]” (p. 33). It is because of this reason that Scots are not completely called as British, or Irish as British, or Welsh as British just because they are living there. These nations are not completely collected under the concept of Britishness since Britishness requires a real acceptance of Britain as their own nation.

It can be asked here how Britishness can be possible while we cannot define one as British although he is living in Britain. It can be questioned here that what makes Britishness possible if settling there is not the only criteria for it. The necessary thing that makes it possible is one’s total identification with it. It is the identification with Britain which makes one British or makes the concept of Britishness possible. If one can achieve his identification with Britain, he can be named completely as British even if he does not live in Britain. But, if one cannot achieve his identification with Britain, he cannot be named as *British* even if he is English, Scot, Welsh or Irish who are the dwellers of that geography. When Parekh Bhikhu (2009) adds “If one has no sense of identification with [Britishness], [he can see] nothing of oneself in it and of it in oneself [...]” (p. 33), this argument grows stronger as there is a repetitive emphasis on the identification with the territory that one is living in. However, even if identification is given more importance, it is impossible for many people to get away from their own identities and come together under a common British identity. While one has a background identity, culture, custom, religion, and language, it is hard for him to belong a new common British values that all citizens feel attached themselves to. In this sense, it can be claimed that Britishness can be just possible with people who keep their previous identities as British citizens in Britain.

Britishness can be just realized with people who call themselves first as English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish and then *British*.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that one cannot create identification with Britain as long as he does not adopt the idea that identities are also related with where we are going. As long as one insists on the idea that identities are just related to whom we are or where we come from, he cannot make any identification with Britain since he will refuse to adopt the identity that Britain supplies for him. Commentators about the subject of Britishness put forward the idea that “ [...], although identities are clearly about ‘who we think we are’ and ‘where we think we came from’, they are also about ‘where we are going’”(Storey, 2010, p.13). As Storey mentions, identities cannot be related only in our birth place, but also related to other places where we are going since we sometimes have to change our places based on our latest needs. As we change our places, our identities are also contributed by the places where we are going since we are encountering with a new culture there that has different life styles, music styles, dressing styles or education styles. No matter how much we try to keep our own identity, we still are influenced by one of these cultures since the time realizes it without our notice.

The term Britishness has changed significantly throughout history and gained different perspectives. “Britishness and understanding Britishness are influenced by several factors, such as social structure, history, culture and the media” (Korbmacher, 2017, p. 1). Various policies and colonialism also have become effective for the creation of a new feeling of Britishness (Saggar, Somerville, 2012). While Britain is formed by English, Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish in the historical context, it is started to be formed by different ethnic minorities after the colonial period like Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi who migrate to Britain. Migration makes a whole Britishness impossible again in Britain since these ethnic minorities bring new identities to Britain and Britain has just became a roof that shelters these different nations and ethnic minorities under it. As it is called as a roof, one can claim here that Britain is not a homogenous nation since different nations and ethnic minorities find places for themselves to maintain their cultures, values and customs in it.

Although some people identify Britishness with Whiteness, ethnic minorities in Britain mostly are made up of black people who come here through migration. (Burkett, 2013) Although England has become a dominant power and constitutes the majority of population in Britain, the existence of some other ethnic minorities can also be seen there as Britain is not a stable nation. Britain is a flexible nation since it is always in the process of formation because of the migrants from other countries (Ajtony, 2012). The concept of Britishness becomes more complex since “Migrant-citizens often refer to Britishness but mean it in a variety of ways: belonging to the UK, belonging to Wales, belonging to/in Scotland, being Scottish, being Welsh, being British, and being English” (Prabhat, 2018, p. 56).

Ethnic minorities may not identify themselves completely as British since some of them are forced to come here. It can be said that they are here by force since some of them are brought by British people with slave trade although they do not want to be in Britain. It is as a result of this event that they see their own residence in Britain as temporary since they are taken from their homes by force. Although they are not willing to leave their own countries, they are defeated against the power of Britain. This argument is also seen in the sentences of Paul Ward. He (2004) says in his book *Britishness since 1870* that “Some migrants and their descendants retain an exclusive sense of their original national (or other) identities, not least because some migrants are ‘pushed’ from their former homes rather than ‘pulled’ towards the United Kingdom, and the attitude to their residence is that it is temporary” (p. 114).

As mentioned earlier, some migrants do not feel themselves as part of Britain since they are here with the will of Britain. These migrants are reluctant to be part of it and they cannot own the feeling of belonging since they are pushed from their countries rather than pulled. Britishness encounters with a danger here since these migrants do not see Britishness as a pride.

It is shaken from its root as Britain is seen as a temporary place. However, a real Britishness does not embrace this idea since it expects from its citizens a full submission:

We need to ensure that all citizens feel a sense of pride in being British and a sense of belonging to this country and to each other, and to ensure that our national symbols, like the Union Flag and the flags of the four nations, are not the tools of extremists, but visibly demonstrate our unity, as we saw through the Golden Jubilee celebrations. (Bradley, 2007, p. 7)

On the other hand, it should also be emphasized here that there are also some other people among these ethnical minorities who adopt Britain as their home. These are mostly people who are always welcomed by Britain's compatriots. Since they are welcomed unlike those people who are pushed here, they are enjoying being one of its citizens. Since some of them see friendship and close concern from Britain's own settlers, they do not want to separate themselves from them as a different nation. Paul Ward (2004) gives an example for this situation in his book *Britishness since 1870* with his talking about the experience of a nurse who comes to London from Jamaica. The nurse feels herself as one of them since she sees nasty and kind behaviors from them, she also reports it by saying "There were some nasty people and some who were nice. You could go into a newsagent's or grocer's shop or get on a bus and they would not take your money because you were a nurse and they appreciated you" (p. 114). It is because of this reason that we cannot make generalization about Britain by just describing it as a place where people are not welcomed or not treated well since some of its migrants are happy to be here. These migrants can contribute to Britishness as long as they are not influenced by the other ones who are treated badly. They can form nearly half part of Britishness unless they are persuaded not to be part of it by other migrants who see Britain's dwellers as rude and exploiting.

The other reason why a whole Britishness is not possible in Britain is the existence of other languages. Although English is the official language of Britain, there are also some other languages that belong to minority groups. Languages like Gaelic, Scots, Irish, Arabic and Turkish are also spoken by their own people in Britain besides English language. These languages do not lose their existence in Britain or they are saved by their native speakers since language is seen as the factor which determines one's ethnicity. Language and ethnic identity are seen as the two sides of the same coin since language is influential in the determination of one's ethnic identity. They are so closely related to each other that the first one brings the second one as it is mentioned by Guus Extra and Kutlay Yağmur (2002) in their discussion paper called *Language diversity in multicultural Europe* by saying "The concepts of language and ethnicity are so closely related that language functions as a major component in most definition of ethnicity" (p. 17).

Because of the existence of many other languages in Britain, language issue keeps its place as a controversial one that has been argued for centuries. Users of minority languages have some doubts about their own languages since English is the common and dominant language in Britain. Migrants mostly see English as a threat to their own languages as it is powerful enough to drop shadow to the existence of minority languages. Actually, usage of English as a common language does not mean that other nations lose their identities and unite under a common language. It does not mean that they integrate with the language that they newly learn and construct new identities by having a sense of belonging to this language. Migrants live an identity conflict here since they know very well that languages have roles in constructing identities. Carol Trosset (1993), who has studies on the importance of Welsh language and Welshness, touches upon the same issue in her study *Welshness Performed*:

Some Welsh-speaking nationalists say that because the English-Welsh have become anglicized linguistically, they have also been anglicized culturally and are no longer Welsh in any sense. It is fairly easy to see that this is not the case; Southeast Wales though English-speaking, remains

culturally Welsh and distinct from England. It is among these English-Welshman that the personal identity conflict becomes the most apparent. (p. 32)

There is a point to note here that their fears are unnecessary since these minority groups also bring varieties to the English language. It can be claimed that migrants not only bring their own languages to the island of Britain but also change English in a way by their own accents or dialects (Wright, 2009). Their interference to English with their own accents or dialects shakes the integrity of English language since it loses its originality. Britain can be accepted as a land in which many different accents or dialects can be seen than any other lands on earth where English is also spoken. David Crystal (2010) says in his essay *Language Development in British English* that “[...] there is more regional accent variation in Britain, relative to the size and population of the country, than in any part of the English-speaking world [...]” (p. 27).

Beside this variation, Crystal also draws attention to the fact that accents or dialects that are used by migrants give some clues about their own identities and hometowns. According to him, accents or dialects can be indicators of their separateness and distinctiveness from native British people. In this point, he (2012) claims that “The primary purpose of an accent is to identify where someone is from, geographically or socially. It is a badge of belonging — and its strength lies in the fact that it can be used in circumstances where other markers of identity fail” (p. 27). Upon his interpretation, it can be emphasized that one can decide about other’s national identity by looking just at his language. After looking at spoken languages, one can say that someone is from an Arab country since he speaks English in one of Arabic accent or dialect. By the same token, it can be said that someone is from Turkey since he also speaks English in a Turkish accent or dialect.

In Britain, there is an increasing number of regional accents due to the fact that there is an increasing number of ethnic groups. It is hard to speak about a “single, exclusive national identity” in Britain (Keating, 1999, p.73) as there is the unification of multiple nations. Crystal (2012) mentions about a new phenomenon in Britain since:

“In Liverpool, there used to be only ‘Scouse’; today we can hear Chinese Scouse, Jamaican Scouse and an array of accent mixes reflecting the growing cosmopolitan character of that city. There are well over 300 languages spoken in London now, and the English used by these ethnic communities inevitably reflects the linguistic background of the speakers” (p. 30).

It means that each nation has a different language and each language has a different accent that shapes the identities of its speaker. This diversity of accents becomes a reason for the birth of RP (Received Pronunciation) in Britain. Since English language starts to be insufficient to provide a unity in itself because of the existence of regional accents, RP is given life to create a common English language among whole British settlers without making any discrimination as British or non-British. Its producers are in the aim of creating a unity in terms of the pronunciation of English words as English becomes a language where everyone can speak it with his own accent. RP is given place at schools since Britain does not want to lose English language’s popularity because of other accents (Skandera, Burleigh, 2005). Since national identity and language are related to each other, they do not want to lose their British identity by losing their English language. In order to realize a whole Britishness, native British people try to keep English language alive with its origin as there is a known fact that continuity of languages is possible with the protection of them.

To sum up, the meaning of Britishness is not same for everybody in Britain and many people define it in a different way. While some of them see it as a new profit, other ones see it as a loss in terms of their national identities. At this point, Britishness cannot be possible in Britain since its root suffers because of the negative definition of it. It also becomes insufficient to keep its originality since there are different national identities, ethnic minorities and languages in Britain who try to live together at the same time. Unless all of them accept Britain



as their first nation and its language as their own language, a whole Britishness cannot be possible as it will come to the point of decaying among people. As long as its citizens accept it with a full identification, the sense of belonging to Britain will never occur as there will be a continuous discrimination from British to non-British.

## References

- Ajtony, Z. (2012). *Britain and Britishness in G. B. Shaw's Plays: A Linguistic perspective*. UK: Cambridge Scholar Publishing.
- Bhikhu, P. (2009). Introduction: The Britishness Question. Gamble, A., and Wright, T.. (Ed.) *Britishness: Perspectives on the British Question*. Uk : Oxford Printed.
- Bradley, I. (2007). *Believing in Britain: The Spiritual Identity of Britishness*. New York: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd.
- Burkett, J. (2013). *Constructing post-imperial Britain: Britishness, 'race' and the radical left in the 1960s*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crystal, D. (2010). Language Developments in British English. Higgins, M, Smith, C, and Storey, J. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Extra, G., and Yagmur K. (2002). *Language Diversity in Multicultural Europe: Comparative Perspectives on Immigrant Minority Languages at Home and at School*. Paris: Unesco.
- Gamble, A., and Wright, T. (2009). Introduction: The Britishness Question. Gamble, A., and Wright, T.. (Ed.) *Britishness: Perspectives on the British Question*. Uk : Oxford Printed.
- Keating, M. (1999). *The Politics of Modern Europe*. United Kingdom: Edward Elgar.
- Korbmacher, M. (2017). *Britishness and the Media. Evaluation of the role of news media in creating, reinforcing or challenging notions of Britishness and belonging*. Grin Verlag: Open Publishing GmbH.
- Prabhat, D. (2018). *Britishness, belonging and citizenship: Experiencing nationality law*. Great Britain: Policy Press.
- Saggar, S., and Sommerville, W. (2012). *Building a British Model of Integration in an Area of Immigration: Policy Lessons for Government*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Skandera, P., and Burleigh, P. (2005). *A manual of English Phonetics and Phonology: Twelve Lessons with an Integrated Course in Phonetic Transcription*. Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag.
- Storey, J. (2010). Becoming British. Higgins, M., Smith, C., and Storey, J. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Trosset, C. (1993). *Welshness Performed: Welsh Concepts of Reason and Society*. London: The University of Arizona Press.
- Ward, P. (2004). *Britishness since 1870*. USA: Routledge.
- Wright, L. (2009). The Languages of Medieval Britain. Brown, P. (Ed.) *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture, C.1350 - C.1500*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.

## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

İngilizlilik kavramı yıllardır tartışılan konulardan birisi olmuştur. Bir kişiyi İngiliz yapan ya da ona kendisini gerçek bir İngilizmiş gibi hissettiren şeyin ne olduğu konusunda değişik görüşler öne sürülmüştür. Kimisi için Britanya adasının içinde yaşamak buna yeterli olmuşken, diğerleri için oranın kültürünü, dilini ve değerlerini kendi kültürü, dili ve değerleri olarak benimsemek yeterli olmuştur.

Bazı düşünürler tam bir İngilizliliğin mümkün olamayacağı kanatindedirler. Çünkü Britanya adası birçok ulusu, etnik azınlığı ve dili aynı anda bünyesinde barındırmaktadır. Britanya deyince akla ilk gelen İngilizler olsa da İrlandalılar, Galler ve İskoçyalıların da oraya büyük katkısı vardır. Britanyayı Britanya yapan sadece İngilizler değil, İrlanda, Galler ve İskoç topluluklarının bir arada yaşaması olmuştur.

Britanya, İrlanda, İskoç ve Galler gibi ulusların dışında, dışarıdan da göç alan bir adadır. Etnik azınlıkların en çok bulunduğu yer neresi diye düşünüldüğünde akla ilk gelen yer Britanya'dır. Çünkü Britanya'da; Pakistan, Hindistan, Bangladeş gibi ülke insanların varlıklarından da söz etmek mümkündür. Bunların çoğunun köle ticaretiyle getirildiği öne sürülse de kendi rızasıyla Britanya topraklarında yaşayan birçok etnik azınlık vardır.

Britanya'yı oluşturan bu gruplar Britanya'nın bütünlüğüne zarar vermektedir. Farklı ulus ve ülke insanların aynı anda Britanya'da olması demek Britanya'nın orijinallikinden uzaklaşması demektir. Bu topluluklar Britanya'ya gelirken kendi dil, kültür, gelenek-görenek ve değerlerini de beraberinde getirmektedir. Dolayısıyla Britanya'da diller, kültürler, gelenek-görenekler ve değerler kaynaşması ve çatışması söz konusudur.

Britanya, en çok dil bütünlüğünün bozulmasından endişe etmektedir. Çünkü dil ve ulusal kimlik aynı anlama gelmektedir. Bir ulusun dilini kaybetmesi, o ulusun kimliğini kaybetmesiyle eş değerdir. Farklılıklara ev sahipliği yapan Britanya için dil kaybı olası bir durumdur. Çünkü, diğer diller İngilizce'ye kendi lehçe ve aksanlarıyla müdahale etmektedirler.