

**Culture Awareness in the Anglophone World II: British  
culture in the Interwar Period through the Series ‘Peaky  
Blinders’**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the representation of British culture during the interwar period and its historical accuracy in the internationally famous series ‘Peaky Blinders’ through the main ethnic groups represented in the show, as well as the linguistic aspect of each of them. For this purpose, first of all, the definition of culture is discussed alongside the boundaries of the term and its different interpretations. Mainly, Spencer-Oatey’s (2012) theory is taken into account for this particular section. Moreover, a brief general explanation of British culture in the interwar period is given in order to contextualise the paper's focus. After this, the work delves into its main point, which is section 3: Peaky Blinders and British culture. After a brief introduction this section is divided into five subsections, each of which explores the history in Great Britain, the linguistic aspect and the historical accuracy of the representation of each major ethnicity represented in the series.

### **1. What is “Culture”?**

The term “culture” is perhaps one of the most difficult concepts to define, since it has been given a different number of interpretations throughout history. Still nowadays, there is no clear definition of this concept and scholars do not completely agree on its characteristics and boundaries. However, there are several points in which these different interpretations converge.

At the dawn of anthropological and cultural studies, “culture” was attached to the intellectual and artistic products of the high class as a result of the classism present in the 19th century society. For instance, in Matthew Arnolds’ *Culture and Anarchy* (1867, as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012), what we now call “popular culture” was left out and only the smallest portion of society (also the richest one) was considered to “have” culture. Later, partly as a reaction towards this way of thinking, Edward Tylor stated in *Primitive Culture* (1870, as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012) that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society” breaking the class boundaries that his ancestor created. However, in my opinion Spencer-Oatey’s (2008) definition is the most accurate one:

Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behavior and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior. (p. 2)

In her article *What is Culture? A compilation of Quotations* (2012) she even provides some key characteristics—which we are going to briefly go through— of this concept we are working on.

### **1.1. Definition of “Culture”**

Culture needs to be shared by a group of people in order to be called so. The beliefs and behaviours of a single hermit cannot be considered culture. Moreover, people live under several layers of cultural influences because the majority of us belong to different social groups: at a national level, religious level, linguistic level, gender level, generation level etc. (Ferraro, 1998, as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

Because of the individual differences caused by all these layers, the same two people in the same set of a culture may not share the entirety of their cultural aspects. Firstly, because these two individuals may not share the same sociological position (religion, language, social status etc.) in a hypothetical culture. And, secondly, because no matter how defined it is that given culture, each individual's psychological aspects and behaviour will also influence the way in which this person feels and interprets this given culture. (Matsumoto, 1996, as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

Culture also has both universal (etic) and distinctive (emic) elements. An example is the best way to illustrate this point. Every human will feel closer to his/her kin than to any stranger. This is an “emic” feature, which is a general cultural feature shared by all humans. Nevertheless, the basis for this or the basis to qualify a person as a “stranger” may differ from one culture to another.

This is why culture should be differentiated from human nature. Because the latter is what every human has in common: fear, love, the need to socialise etc (an emic feature);

whereas the former modifies the way we express all these feelings mentioned before (an etic feature).

## **1.2. Characteristics**

There are no cultures that never change. These changes of norms and conventions are produced by discoveries and inventions, which would be the internal factors for a culture to change. However, most of the changes are borrowed by other external cultures, a process known as “cultural diffusion”. This is a selective process in which cultures that have contacted another one pick the most useful aspects of the contacted culture and bring them to their own. Therefore, it is easier for a technological aspect to be borrowed than for example, a religious aspect. In any case, we must bear in mind that “cultural diffusion” is a two-way process and we must never fall into the “superior/inferior culture paradigm” as well as the “high/low culture paradigm”. Finally, the traits adopted by one culture from an external one will certainly be subject to change in order to adapt it better to the recipient culture.

We have to think about cultures as coherent and logical systems. They are organised systems in which each different component is related to the rest of components in one way or another. This means that if any of the aforementioned small changes is introduced into a certain aspect it may change the whole or the majority of the system. (Ferraro, 1998, as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012)

We also always acquire culture from the people that surround us when we are growing up. Babies born at the same time in Uganda and in Mexico will not be taught to respond to social and physical stimuli the same way.

## **1.3. Language and History Regarding Culture**

Language shapes many aspects of us and languages are essential parts of any culture and they even determine some. As stated in Kinzler et al. (2010, p. 106):

Language marks social identity through variation. There are roughly 6,000 human languages around the globe, mutually unintelligible, and (with rare exception) fully learnable only in childhood. These aspects materially affect with whom one can communicate and coordinate, and from whom one can learn. Even among those who speak the same language, accent and dialect reveal a person's cultural origins, and so serve as honest signals to identity, with consequences for whom others choose to interact with and which models others trust to imitate and learn from.

Culture is also shaped by history as historical processes are the ones which influence nations and peoples. Even the tiniest event can lead to a new era. As Nunn (2012) explains:

Conceptually, historical events could have persistent impacts if they alter the relative costs and benefits of different cultural traits, affecting their prevalence in a society. In turn, if cultural traits are transmitted vertically from parents to children, then the impacts will persist through time.

The paper is now going to focus on the culture of the British Isles in the Interwar period.

## **2. The Interwar Period**

### **2.1. Europe**

The Interwar Period was a very difficult time in history for Europe and the western world. After the first World War technological advancements led to the relatively prosperous Roaring Twenties, a time of a relatively prosperous economy. This was immediately followed by the 1929 Wall Street crash, which set the precedent for the Great Depression, one of the worst economic crises in history.

Due to all these economic ups and downs, this period also saw the rise of communism in Russia and the creation of the Soviet Union alongside the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. The aftermath of World War I also brought the destruction of three of the biggest empires in the world: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German Empire and the

Ottoman Empire. This event also increased the anti-imperialist sentiment in many places of the world. (Treasure et al., 2022)

## **2.2. The United Kingdom**

Of course, the United Kingdom was no exception. Such a devastating war as The Great War brought a generation of broken young men from the trenches in Belgium. The will of the Irish for their independence increased, eventually giving birth to the Irish Free State in 1922 after a cruel civil war. Communism and other socialist ideologies gained power due to the fact that men returning from war realised that they just fought for oligarchs and monarchs to whom they did not owe anything. As well as fascism, as a nationalistic and reactionary response to the first independence movements of the empire. After the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression caused by the Wall Street Crash also affected the then biggest empire in the world. An event which eventually led to World War II. (Taylor, 1965) Now the work is going to focus on the most important ethnicities represented in the show.

## **3. 'Peaky Blinders' and British Culture**

This series is a great reflection of British Culture of this period as although it is somewhat fantasised, it has a historical base for most of its characters. In Long's (2017) words:

Knigh deploys his working-class credentials to personalize the story and to assert the authenticity of its drama and indeed to bring to life a place and experience akin to the Thompsonian injunction to write 'History from below' (1967). The imperative of this radical interpretation of the past that informed post-war British social history sought out women's history, accounts of class struggle and indeed the general social inequalities and injustice that marked a 'whole way of struggle' in pre-Welfare Britain.

### Information on the series ‘Peaky Blinders’:<sup>1</sup>

<b>Creative director</b>	Steven Knight
<b>Launched</b>	12 September 2013
<b>No. of Seasons</b>	6
<b>No. of Episodes</b>	36
<b>Originally Broadcast on</b>	BBC Two (seasons 1-4) and BBC One (seasons 5-6)

### 3.1. The Peaky Blinders and the Gypsies

Every European knows about the existence of the peoples called *gypsies*, *romas* or *romanis* among other names, within the territory of their own country, as they constitute 10 to 12 million people in Europe. Although according to *Fundación Secretariado Gitano*, —the biggest foundation for gypsy culture in Spain— nowadays they are more prevalent in countries such as Romania (est. 2 million people), Bulgaria or Spain (700,000 in the last two countries), Great Britain has not been an exception and counts an estimate of 100,000 to 500,000 of the aforementioned people.

In the United Kingdom, particularly, these people have historically been known as “travellers”. Sadly, gypsies had no better treatment in Great Britain than in other European countries and faced discrimination as everywhere. Having a look at the historical period that concerns us this is what Cressy (2018, p. 239) said about it:

The opening decades of the twentieth century saw endless squabbles about the right of itinerants to camp. Local authorities set up signs and barriers, declared camping to be trespassing, and brought actions at law against Gypsies and van-dwellers who refused to leave. The central government declined to become involved. Making use of existing laws regarding highways and commons, the Council at Tavistock, Devon, warned Gypsies to leave Dartmoor, and threatened prosecution of any who remained. The Corporation at Southend, Essex, blocked Gypsies camping at Hind’s Green for the annual fair. Continuing battles at Lambourne Common, Essex, led to forcible evictions and Gypsy resistance. On several occasions the authorities employed traction engines to

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<sup>1</sup> More information available on: <https://peakyblinders.tv/>



shift Gypsy vans that had been chained together by the wheels. The pattern was repeated in many parts of England.

However, the protagonists of this series are actually *didicoys*. A didicoy (Angloromani; didikai, also diddicoy, diddykai) is one of a group of caravan-dwelling roadside people who are not true Roma according to the Collins dictionary<sup>2</sup>. The Glosbe dictionary on the other hand defines this word as: “A gypsy or traveller, especially one who is not Romani or is not full-blooded Romani”, which is the most common use for the word. Despite being of mixed-blood, the protagonists of the series feel more attached to their gypsy part as they are more in touch with that part of the family due to the fact that their Gorger father left them when they were kids.

Because of this we can see multiple times during the series in which ‘The Blinders’ interact with other gypsy families they know and sometimes even talk in their own language. Or that is what most people thought because for the first two seasons these scenes were recorded in plain Romanian spoken with a strong British accent. For example, when Tommy meets the Lee family’s matriarch in Season 1 Episode 4, at minute 12:06, Tommy says “Am venit cu o propunere” to the woman and she replies: “Credeam că e aliatul tău” to which the Blinder replies: “Plănuiesc să-l trădez”. Translated, the conversation would be something like:

**Tommy:** I have come with a proposition.

**Matriarch:** I thought he was your ally.

**Tommy:** I plan to betray him.

This language is supposed to be Romani, but is actually Romanian, a language that English gypsies did not speak at all at the time. This is a mistake that the screenwriters committed for the first two seasons but corrected for the rest.

In the following seasons, the gypsies speak a language which they themselves call “Rokka”. For example, at the beginning of Season 06 Episode 01, Ruby (Tommy’s daughter) says some words in gypsy while dreaming which are heard by Lizzie (Tommy’s secretary) and deeply concern Tommy. The words are “Tikna mora o beng”.

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<sup>2</sup> Information available on: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/didicoy>

Later speaking, when asked about the meaning of these words, the show creator Steven Knight said to Digital Spy: "It's difficult to translate from the Romani, but it means 'devil'. It means a bit more than that, but yeah. So it's not good. It's not a good thing." (Mozafari, 2022). According to Glosbe's English-Romani dictionary *tikno* means 'child', *mora* means 'to kill', and *o beng* means 'the devil'.

Apart from the language, there are also many recursive reflections of gypsy culture throughout the series. Mainly about their "traveller" lifestyle as when they show how the Lees live in caravans and move from one place to another with them. A good proof for this is how Charles G. Leland tells us in *The English Gypsies and Their Language* (1874) when he was talking to a gypsy man and he tells him "I was born in the open air, and put me down anywhere, in the fields or woods, I can always support myself." Moreover, the series also shows part of the gypsie's beliefs which may differ from the Gorgor Christian ones but are also influenced by them. Apart from the stereotypical fortune-tellers we can also see amulets such as the Black Madonna which is also a Catholic amulet supposed to bring the protection of Virgin Mary to the individual bearing it. Tommy uses this amulet in order to protect his daughter after the incident mentioned before. Leland (1874, p. 24) also tells us that gypsies, having an oral tradition, were (at his time at least) taught the Christian doctrine but would adapt 'The Sacred Scriptures' to their culture believing, for example, that:

"The ivy, and holly, and pine trees, never told a word where our Saviour was hiding himself, and so they keep alive all the winter, and look green all the year. But the ash, like the oak (lit . strong tree), told of him (lit . across, against him), where he was hiding, so they have to remain dead through the winter. And so we Gipsies always burn an ash-fire every Great Day. For the Saviour was born in the open field like a Gipsy, and rode on an ass like one, and went round the land a begging his bread like a Rom. And he was always a poor wretched man like us, till he was destroyed by the Gentiles".

As mentioned before, the protagonists of this series are *didicoys* and therefore they mostly speak in English during the show. The brummie or Birmingham accent, as its name states, is the accent of the English language spoken by the majority of people in Birmingham and its surrounding area. This is a very characteristic accent often used in

British television for comedy shows. Urszula Clark (2013) has excellently described this accent in his book: *West Midlands English: Birmingham and the Black Country*. The main differences of this particular accent are the lexicon and the phonemes. Lexically we have distinguishable brummie words as *bab* (babe), *blart* (to cry), *fock* (a milder version of the swear word “fuck”), *each* (used to say “everyone”) and *snap* (food) among others. Regarding phonemes, most of the back vowels and diphthongs pronounced in Received Pronunciation<sup>3</sup> are different:

Phoneme	Brummie	Example
/æ/	[a]	trap
/aʊ/	[æʊ~æə]	mouth
/eɪ/	[aɪ]	face
/əʊ/	[ʌʊ]	goat
/ʌ/	[ʊ]	strut
/ʊ/	[ʊ]	foot
/ɔɪ/	[ʌʊə]	force

Finally let’s have a look at the historical accuracy of the series regarding this theme. It is true that there were some Peaky Blinders in the streets of Birmingham. Nevertheless, this was not an organised gang but rather a bunch of small gangs and independent criminals who were referred to as “peaky blinders”, which became almost a synonym for “criminal” in the city. There is a legend about the origin of the name which states that they sewed disposable safety razor blades into the peaks of their flat caps in order to blind their enemies. This is even shown in the series as the gang’s identity mark.

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<sup>3</sup> Received Pronunciation (RP for short) is the instantly recognisable accent often described as ‘typically British’. (Robinson, 2019)



*Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4: Season 01 Episode 02 fight scene in which the Peaky Blinders use their caps to blind their enemies.*

However, Birmingham historian Carl Chinn in his book *Peaky blinders: The real story: The true history of Birmingham's most notorious gang.* (2019) has disproved this fact. This gangs actually operated during the 1890's instead of the 1920's. Moreover, despite the fact that they were actually called The Peaky Blinders, and were from Birmingham, the supposed origin of the name involving razor blades on their hats is probably a legend. Those were luxury items at that time and would never be used for the aforementioned purpose, especially by some of poor gypsies. Chinn is also a descendant of one of these "peaky blinders" as many brummies are. His great-grandfather, Edward Derrick was a thief and a repeatedly imprisoned serial offender. These "peaky blinders" were put down by 1914 using strong police action and sending them to the frontline in Belgium. However, the remaining of these offenders was actually united in a gang called "The Birmingham Gang". This gang's leader, Billy Kimber, is portrayed as the Peaky Blinders' enemy in the series despite being the one who continued their legacy in real life. There are other characters who existed in the series but they will be discussed in their corresponding subsection.

### **3.2. The Italians**

Italy has historically been a country with one of the biggest diasporas in the world. Since the second half of the 19th century, these Mediterranean people have been scattering around the world and creating new communities. Because of this, there are

countries which have a significant population of Italian descendants, or *oriundi italiani* in the Italian language, within their borders. Among these countries we find Brazil, with an estimated 27.2 *oriundi*; Argentina with 19.7, and the United States with 17.3, followed by many other countries such as: France, Canada, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela etc. (Casini, 2020)

Sadly, studies determining how many *oriundi* live in the United Kingdom nowadays were not found. However, the Office for National Statistics estimates that there were around 300,000 Italian born citizens living in the UK as of June 2021. (Stickney, 2021)

As in the rest of Europe, Italians began to immigrate to the United Kingdom in the second half of the 19th century, escaping from poverty in their own country. As Dresser (n.d.) explains:

From the mid-1800s Italian migrants came to Britain from poor mountainous areas including around Parma and Lucca and, by the century's end, from more southerly sources in the Frosinone and Caserta provinces. In Britain many Italians worked as traveling musicians and performers, as statuette makers, mosaic and terrazzo workers and ice cream traders. Their regional costumes, languages, Catholic faith and extended family structure distinguished them from the host community.

The Italians were a peculiar group of immigrants owing to the fact that they had a very family-centred Catholic culture. This meant that they would live in the same area even occupying whole neighbourhoods. They had a huge sense of community and they would often help each other even if they were complete strangers. Carol Volante elaborates quite well on this issue in her PhD thesis *Identities and perceptions : Gender, generation and ethnicity in the Italian Quarter, Birmingham, c1891-1938* (2001):

The establishment of numerous individual Italian communities in Britain was usually achieved through two methods: chain migration, or the padrone system. In both types of migration Italians probably originated from similar regions in Italy prior to settling in Britain. Once here they tended not to disperse throughout a particular town or city, but instead they remained together,

occupying consecutive 30 houses, whole courtyards or streets, more often for upward of one generation. This pattern of settlement meant that Italian communities not only comprised compatriots, but also kin and therefore people who shared regional cultural traits. These common features held by Italian communities in Britain are believed to have culminated in the long-term effect of sustaining their ethnic group identity and relative isolation.

Having a look at the Birmingham area, this being a major industrial city, Italian immigrants started to arrive there in the early 19th century. There were two major groups of Italian immigrants at this stage: the settled immigrants and the itinerant immigrants. The former were mainly craftsmen originating from the Lombardy region who lived scattered throughout the city in their workshop-centred households, while the latter were mostly lone males from villages nearby each other who arrived in the 1830's and used to live in lodging houses. These itinerant migrants returned to Italy during winter and only stayed in Birmingham to work. The last and the biggest Italian migrant wave came to Birmingham at the end of the 19th century. They came from poor regions around Naples and established in the St. Bartholomew Quarter (later known as the "Italian Quarter"). As they came from the same area, it was easier for them to stick to their ties. Volante (2001, p.71) explains it very well:

This common method of migration and settlement of family, kin and friends, who shared a similar culture, quite probably engendered a measure of loyalty and security between them. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated how numerous Italian communities in Britain were established around Italian regional alliances. So important did Italians consider regional links that distrust existed of any Italians who did not share their dialect. Having the 'right' dialect almost guaranteed immigrants some assistance when they arrived in their adopted home, and it was in this way that kinship ties were maintained in both the receiving country and in the birthplace of the immigrants. Italians fully exploited kin and fan-dly connections, and no matter how tenuous and distant these were they would be used to secure a contact in a receiving town.

Regarding the Italian-British culture represented in the series, we can say that it is very present as, although it could be qualified as a *cliché*, the Italian mafia is Tommy

Shelby's enemy for two seasons. Apart from this, we can see an example of the sense of community the Italians had represented in the very first episode of the series. In this episode, Danny Whizz-Bang, a Great War veteran suffering from severe PTSD, kills an Italian shop-owner after an outbreak. As a consequence, the Italian gangsters ask Tommy to kill him in a more human way if he does not want them to do the job. Tommy, finally, mocks Danny's execution.

Finally, we will have a look at the historical accuracy of the series regarding the Italian community. The main Italian characters featured in 'Peaky Blinders' are Darby Sabini and Lucca Changretta. The latter is a completely made up character (Chinn, 2019, p. 138) but the former has a historical base that we are going to discuss. Darby Sabini is portrayed as the classic Italian mobster, based on the *bella figura*, well dressed and elegant, using these traits in order to mark his Italian identity. We can find this kind of characterization in films such as 'The Godfather' or 'The Untouchables'.



*Figure 5: Sabini and his gang depicted as stereotypical Italian “Bella Figura” mobsters in Season 02 Episode 04*

However, the real Charles “Darby” Sabini was born in 1888 to Ottavio Sabini, an Italian immigrant, and Elizabeth Handley, an English woman, in Clerkenwell. He was baptised in the Anglican church of the same neighbourhood as Ottavio Handley, therefore he was not a full-blooded Italian and not even Catholic. He married an English woman, Annie Emma Potter (in an Anglican church) and in Carl Chinn's (2019, p.139) words, “Sabini himself would later stress his Englishness, declaring that ‘England is the only country

for me’, whilst his only son, Ottavio Harry, was killed fighting for Britain in August 1943”. He was better known as “Darby”, a nickname that is thought to have come from a term for a southpaw boxer (Chinn, 2019, p. 139). However, his real name has been a source for debate and confusion among historians as Carl Chinn explains in (2019, p. 139):

Contemporary news reports often referred to Darby Sabini as Charles, which has led to confusions over his real identity by historians, including myself. Sabini later acknowledged that he also called himself Frederick Handley, after his mother’s maiden name, but pronounced clearly that ‘my name is not Charles Sabini’ and that ‘my real name is Ottavio Sabini’.

Sabini was known to become the leader of a gang after World War I. He was also involved in a gang war for the control of the racecourses and bookmaking in 1921. This gang was fought against the other two major gangs involved in bookmaking and which are featured in the series: Billy Kimber’s Birmingham gang (see subsection 3.1.) and Alfie Solomons’ gang (see subsection 3.3).

### **3.3. The Jews**

The Jews have been a significant population of Europe throughout history. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, there were an estimated 1,317,500 Jews in Europe as of 2021. By all means, the United Kingdom has been no exception, having an estimated 292,000 Hebrews within its borders as claimed by the same source.

The first Jewish community arrived in England in 1070. William the Conqueror invited them to come from Normandy because he believed that their commercial skills would benefit the economy of his country. Although they were not allowed to own land or to participate in trade, they could lend money while charging interests, an activity which the Catholic doctrine forbade back then (Jacobs, 1906). Everything continued this way for this community until 1290, when Edward I expelled the Jews from England (Huscroft, 2006). It would not be until the second half of the 19th century that the Jewish community could live freely in the United Kingdom. At this time, Jewish emancipation was complete in almost every aspect of life. Also at this time, many



Eastern European Jews emigrated to England escaping from the many pogroms that were taking place in the Russian Empire at that time, so there were two differentiated Jewish communities: the historic anglicised community and the new Yiddish speaking immigrant community —both communities lived primarily in London as well as in Manchester and Leeds (Jacobs, 1906).

This community is depicted in the show as a Jewish Camden Town gang led by Alfie Solomons, whose historical veracity will be discussed later. Being from Camden Town, Solomons and his gang speak in Cockney dialect throughout the series. As claimed by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* Cockney is a dialect traditionally spoken by working-class Londoners (Jacot de Boinod, 2020). However, this particular dialect is at risk of disappearing seeing that it is being slowly replaced by a multiethnolect, currently spoken by the many immigrants from various backgrounds in London’s working-class areas (BBC News, 2010). This accent has many phonetic features which distinguish it from Received Pronunciation but the most remarkable ones in Hughes’ (1979) opinion are the following:

- When /l/ occurs finally, after a vowel or before a consonant in the same syllable it is released as a vowel as in:

RP	Cockney	Example
wɛl	wɛʊ	well
mɪlk	mɪʊk	milk
'teɪbl	'tæɪbʊ	table

- TH fronting of [θ] into a [f] and [ð] into a [v] as in:

RP	Cockney	Example
θɪn	fɪn	thin
bəð	bɛv	bathe

- /h/ is almost invariably absent. When it is present, it is likely to be in a stressed position.

- The glottal stop, [ʔ], is found representing /t/ between vowels and before a pause as in the words *butterfly* and *wet*.
- -ing is /ɪŋ/ as in:

RP	Cockney	Example
'leɪŋ	'leɪɪŋ	laying

(In the word *nothing* it may be represented as -ɪŋk)

- Certain diphthongs are markedly different from RP when they are released:

RP	Cockney
eɪ	æɪ
əʊ	ʌʊ
aɪ	ɑɪ
aʊ	æə

The actor Tom Hardy, who is well-known for having a great capacity to switch accents, uses this kind of speech throughout the whole series when interpreting his character Alfie Solomons.

There is another aspect that is also worth mentioning about this particular dialect: the rhyming slang. In order to construct a sentence using rhyming slang you must first take a word, for example: *stairs*. Then you must find another word that rhymes with it, for instance: *pears*. After this, you have to make a pair of related terms with the rhyming word, such as: *apples and pears*. Finally, you have your Cockney rhyming slang word to use in a sentence as in: “I went up the apples and pears”. Usually, the second word of the pair rhyming with the original word is omitted leaving the sentence as “I went up the apples” in order to say “I went up the stairs”. This is an actual sentence used in Cockney slang. (Langfocus, 2018) Unfortunately, there is no evidence of the use of this kind of speech throughout the series.

Last but not least, we are going to discuss Alfie Solomons' historical veracity. Carl Chinn (2019) confirms that Alfie Solomon (not Solomons) existed at that time and that in fact, he was a gangster involved in racecourse bookmaking. Nevertheless, he was not as depicted in the show by far. First of all, he is depicted as a religious Orthodox Jew, which is not true:

Named as Alfie Solomons in the series *Peaky Blinders*, he is portrayed wearing the clothes of Hasidic Jewish men: the wide-brimmed black hat worn on weekdays, a long black overcoat, black trousers and a white shirt. The members of the gang led by Solomons are depicted as Orthodox Jews, wearing yarmulkes and tzitzit –the fringes or tassels worn on traditional or ceremonial garments by Jewish men. By contrast, the real Alfie Solomon was a secular Jew whose family had been settled in England for decades and were not recent immigrants fleeing the pogroms in the Russian Empire. (Chinn, 2019, p. 133)



*Figure 6: Alfie Solomons depicted as a Hasidic Jew in Season 03 Episode 05*

Moreover, he is also depicted as the leader of a Camden Town Jewish gang, which is also not very close to reality. Solomon was attacked by Kimber's gang (see subsection 3.1.) on 12th March 1921, as Alfie's brother, Simeon Solomon (who is not represented in the show), told Chinn (2019) in an interview in 1987. This incident made Alfie seek revenge, but he had to involve Sabini's gang in order to fulfil this goal, which indicates that he was no important mobster. As Chinn (2019, p.136) explains:

Brian McDonald stressed that Alfie Solomon had a gang before he was attacked and that Kimber had a hatred for him ‘as one of the scum that threatened racecourse bookies at the edge of a razor’. Given Kimber’s long record for violence it rings hollow for him to take the high moral ground. However, Solomon’s brother claimed, ‘My older brother’s involvement with Darby Sabini came after he was beaten up by the Brummie mob.’ Whether or not Solomon did have his own men before he was attacked, he was later described in a police report as ‘nothing better than a member of a gang of thieves who blackmail bookmakers for a living’. But if he did lead a gang, in early 1921 it was not strong enough to take on Kimber and his allies, so Solomon sought the support of a powerful man called Edward Emanuel.



*Figure 7: Alfie Solomons and a member of his gang also in a Hasidic Jewish attire in Season 04 Episode 04*

This Edward Emanuel mentioned above was the actual East End Jewish gang leader. Unlike Solomon, Emanuel started as a pickpocket and then became a mob chief capable of terrorising other gangs and making deals with them.

Emanuel ‘had a group of Jewish terrors’ who he could send in to help Alfie Solomon and, as Prince emphasised, ‘The Jewish team found their power in strength and gameness. They wouldn’t be dictated to.’ Still, they did not have

the numbers to take on the Birmingham Gang and their London allies. So, because ‘Emanuel was pally with the Italian push’ – the Sabini Gang – he called them in for more backup. (Chinn, 2019, p. 137)

Edward Emanuel is not depicted in the series. Instead, Alfie Solomons takes his place as a Jewish mob leader.

### **3.4. The Irish**

The Irish island has been totally or partially ruled by an English monarch since the late 12th century. From the time of the early Anglo-Norman conquest until nowadays it is undeniable that Ireland and Great Britain have centuries of shared history. Despite having started controlling the island during the late 12th century, the English crown did not achieve full control of Ireland until 1541, when Henry VIII was crowned King of Ireland by the Irish Parliament. After this event, many English and Scottish Protestant settlers were brought to the Emerald Island displacing many Catholic landowners, which sowed the seeds for conflict. In 1801 the Irish Parliament was abolished by the Act of Union. Later, in the 1840s the Great Potato Famine took place, during which an estimated 1 million perished and 2 million were forced to emigrate, this event is considered by many as a turning point in relations between Ireland and Great Britain. Nationalism arose during the second half of the 19th century, eventually leading to the 1916 Easter Uprising. Although the uprising was brutally suppressed, nationalism was not, leading to the outbreak of the Anglo-Irish war between the Irish Republican Army and the British unionist forces. The war started in 1919 and finished in 1921 when the truce was signed. Following this event, the Anglo-Irish treaty was signed, dividing the island and creating the Irish Free State in the south. However, the conflict did not end here because part of the IRA did not agree with the treaty. (Stamp, 2014) This is the time in which *Peaky Blinders* is set.

The series features various Irish characters, some of them important. Several characters are members of the anti-treaty IRA<sup>4</sup>. The remaining characters are the Northern Irish Protestant Chief Inspector Campbell, sent to Birmingham in order to fight both crime and Irish republicanism; and Galway Protestant Grace Shelby (née Burgess), who is

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<sup>4</sup> The anti-treaty IRA was the faction of the Irish Republican Army that opposed the Anglo-Irish treaty and continued to fight after the war. (Stamp, 2014)

first sent to assist Campbell but ends up falling in love with Tommy. In addition, Father John Hughes is the main antagonist in season 3 —a Catholic priest member of a secret league.

Regarding the way these characters speak, only Campbell and Grace will be discussed, as the other Irishmen are not main characters and/or I have not found reliable information about the Irish-English variety they are supposed to speak. Moreover, as Hiberno-English<sup>5</sup> is a very broad and complex topic that would require its own work, this paper will focus on the varieties spoken by these two characters respectively.

On the one hand, Chief Inspector Campbell is an Irish Protestant brought from Belfast to Birmingham. Therefore, he speaks Ulster English. Before delving into these two accents, the fact that most Irish English varieties are rhotic must be taken into account. This means that every /r/ before a vowel is pronounced and that final a /r/ after a vowel may result in a R-coloured vowel (for instance: /ɹ̥/). (Hickney, 2007) According to Hickney (2007, p. 333) these are the main features of Ulster English:

- Palatalisation of /k, g/ before /a/:

RP	Ulster English	Example
kæt	kjæt	cat

- Dentalisation of /t, d/ before /r/:

RP	Ulster English	Example
'betə	'bet̪ə	better

- Lowering and unrounding of /ɒ/:

RP	Ulster English	Example
pɒt	pət	pot

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<sup>5</sup> A term used to refer to Irish English.

- /ʊ/ realised as /ʌ/:

RP	Ulster English	Example
bʌt	bɒt	but

- Lowering of /ɛ/ to /æ/:

RP	Ulster English	Example
sɛt	sæt	set

- The use of /au/ before /l/ in monosyllables:

RP	Ulster English	Example
əʊld	aul	old

The actor Sam Neill explained to the Belfast Telegraph that he contacted Co Antrim actors Liam Neeson and James Nesbitt so they could teach him how to speak with an Ulster accent for Campbell’s character. Although Neill was born in Omagh, he has lived in New Zealand since he was 7 years old, so he lost the Northern Irish accent long ago. He also answered to the critics that described his accent as “mingled” by explaining that he did “the best he could” as Neeson and Nesbitt have quite distinct accents despite being born near each other. (Ferguson, 2014)



Figure 8: *Chief Inspector Campbell in Season 02 Episode 02*

On the other hand, Grace Shelby is said to be from Galway in the show. Therefore she speaks with a western accent. According to Wells (1982, pp. 417-436) the main features of the Western Irish accent are as follows:

- The backing and slight lowering of /aʊ/ into /ɐʊ~ʌʊ/:

<b>RP</b>	<b>Western Irish English</b>	<b>Example</b>
maʊθ	mʌʊθ	mouth

- /θ/ and /ð/, respectively pronounced as [t~tʰ] and [d].

<b>RP</b>	<b>Western Irish English</b>	<b>Example</b>
θɪn	tʰɪn	thin
ðəʊ	do:	though

- The preservation of /əʊ/ as a mophthongal:

<b>RP</b>	<b>Western Irish English</b>	<b>Example</b>
gəʊt	go:t	goat

- /s/ and /z/ may respectively be pronounced by older speakers as /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ before a consonant:

<b>RP</b>	<b>Western Irish English</b>	<b>Example</b>
fɪst	fɪʃt	fist
'wɪzɪdəm	'wɪʒɪdəm	wisdom

Annabelle Wallis, the actress who plays Grace, born in Oxford but brought up in Portugal, told to the Interview magazine that she had little problems when imitating a foreign accent because she went to an international school with students from 41 different nations, which obliged her to constantly change her accent in order to be understood by her classmates. (Brown, 2014)





*Figure 9: Grace Burgess in Season 01 Episode 02*

Having a look at the historical veracity of the Irish characters and the events involving them throughout the series, there is part true and part fiction, as in the entire show.

In the first place, Grace is a totally fictional character as well as Father John Hughes. However, Inspector Campbell has a real base despite being mostly fictional. There actually was a Northern Irish Protestant chief constable named Charles Haughton Rafter, who was sent to Birmingham in order to put down the real Peaky Blinders. The difference is that, as it has been explained before in this work, it took place just before The Great War and not after as it is shown in the series (see subsection 3.1.). Carl Chinn explains this in his book *Peaky blinders: The real story: The true history of Birmingham's most notorious gang* (2019):

These peaky blinders were put down before the First World War by strong police action led by Birmingham's chief constable, Charles Haughton Rafter. He was a Northern Irish Protestant, as is Chief Inspector (later Major) Campbell – a character in the first series of the show. However, whereas Campbell is aggressively puritanical, Rafter was respected by Irish Nationalists and his deputy chief constable, Michael McManus, was a Catholic. Supported by the

many law-abiding folk in the back streets, by stronger sentencing, and by the growing popularity of association football and the emergence of boxing as a codified sport, Rafter and his men turned Birmingham into a more peaceable city by ridding it of the peaky blinders.

There is also an event described in the series that has a real base. In the very first episode of the show, Tommy's gang accidentally take a crate full of weapons from the Birmingham Small Arms factory. Tommy decides to secretly sell them in order to make a profit. The IRA offers money to Thomas for the guns in order to use them in the Anglo-Irish war but he refuses. In reality, as declassified files from Military Service Pension Collection of the Irish Defence Forces Military Archives show, something like this happened. In fact, John Joseph McGrath's (or Séan MacCraic) pension application shows that he bought and transported weapons from the Birmingham Midland Gun Company to Dublin by himself. The difference lays in the fact that this event is shown in the series as happening in 1919, in the context of the Anglo-Irish war instead of 1916 before the Easter Rising.

### **3.5. The Scots**

Although Scotland has always had a strong feeling of identity, it has been governed from London since 1603, when James VI of Scotland inherited the English throne. Later, the northernmost region of Great Britain became part of the United Kingdom with the approval of the *Act of Union* by the Scottish parliament in 1707. (Smout, 1964) Apart from this, Scottish culture has always been part of British culture as Scotland itself is part of the British Isles.

In the show the *Billy Boys*, a 1930's right wing gang that operated in Glasgow, are the ones representing Scotland as the main antagonists in season 5. But, before delving into this topic, it is necessary to point out that the characters representing this gang are supposed to speak in a Glaswegian accent. Of course, it is not a totally accurate accent because it is meant to be understood by the international audience, therefore it could be better classified as standard Scottish English.

Scottish English is the variety of English spoken in Scotland. Not to be confused with Scots, which is a separate dialect (or language depending on whom you ask). According to Wells (1982, pp. 399-412) these are this accent's main features:

- Rhoticity: The Scottish accent is rhotic as the Irish one (see subsection 3.4). Nevertheless, the [r] sound is realised in a different way. The stereotypical conception is that Scots realise this sound as a trill<sup>6</sup>. On the one hand, according to Grant (1913 in Wells, 1982, p. 411), this was the linguistic reality in Scotland in 1913:

...within recent years there has been a tendency to attenuate the force of the trill especially in final positions and before another consonant. [...] The trill may be reduced (finally and before consonants) to a single tap [r], or even to a fricative consonant [ʃ], and in the latter case a change of quality in the preceding vowel is perceptible. The consonantal effect, in any case, is never lost in genuine Scottish speech, and the trill may still be said to be the characteristic Scottish sound corresponding to the letter r.

On the other hand, in 1938 only three out of ten students realised the trill sound. (Wells, 1982, p. 411) The reality in 1929 —the year in which series 5 is set— would be in between the aforementioned two. Nowadays, although the use of the trill still remains in the northernmost part of the country, it has been substituted by an alveolar tap [ɾ] before and between vowels and by a post-alveolar [ɹ] before consonants and in final position.

- The retention of the voiceless labial-velar fricative [ɸ], also phonemicised as /hw/:

RP	Scottish English	Example
wɛə	ɸeɹ	where

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<sup>6</sup> The term used to denominate the voiced alveolar roll (Wells, 1982)

- The monophthongisation of various diphthongs:

RP	Scottish English	Example
nɪə	niː	near
kjʊə	kuː	cure
gəʊt	got	goat
feɪs	fes	face

- The closing and shortening of vowel [ɪ] and closing of vowel [ʊ]:

RP	Scottish English	Example
pʊl	pul	pull
bi:d	bid	bead

- The retention of velar fricative [x] although, in opposition to Scots, in Scottish English it is restricted to proper names such as: Tulloch→/'tʌlʌx/.

In order to conclude this topic the historical veracity of the characters representing the Scottish people in the show must be examined. As it has been mentioned before in this subsection the Billy Boys were a real gang that operated in Glasgow in the 1920's. They were a protestant gang led by Billy Fullerton, (not Jimmy McCavern as shown in the series) native to Bridgeton, Glasgow. (Davies, 2013) Although the name of the leader of the gang in the series and the fact that they were Tommy's enemies is not true, everything else involving this gang is pretty accurate.

It is true that Fullerton was a member of the British Union of Fascists and that his gang collaborated with them several times as shown in season 5. He was even awarded a medal for strike-breaking in the 1926 General Strike (Cassidy, 2021). Furthermore, it is also true that they specially targeted Catholics. That can be perceived by listening to their anthem "Billy Boys", which was sung when marching through Catholic neighbourhoods:

Hello, Hello  
We are the Billy Boys  
Hello, Hello  
You'll know us by our noise  
We're up to our knees in Fenian blood  
Surrender or you'll die  
For we are  
The Brighton Derry Boys  
(BBC News, 1999)

The word Fenian in the song refers to an Irish nationalist secret organisation called Fianna Eireann that used to operate in the United States, Ireland and Britain during the 19th century. It was later used to refer to Irish republicanism broadly. (Britannica, 2021) The anthem is featured in the series as the Billy Boys themselves appear singing it. In addition, this anthem was also sung in Glasgow Rangers matches, even after Fullerton's death. This made the UEFA pressure the team board to prohibit the song, especially because of the "up to our knees in Fenian blood" line, which was considered offensive against Catholics. (BBC Sport, 2006) Finally, the song was included in a "banned chants list" in Scotland in 2011, (Daily Record, 2011) although it is still sung by some of its supporters nowadays. (Swindon, 2018)

#### **4. Conclusion**

To sum up, after going through all this information, there are some conclusions that we can draw. As far as the historical accuracy of the series is concerned, the show is obviously fictional and made in order to appeal to the general public. Although it has a historical base and features some historical characters, history is somewhat changed for the sake of the story. Nevertheless, taking into account that the series does not pretend to be a historical documentary at all, we can say that overall the show's historical setting is quite acceptable. It represents the United Kingdom as a very diverse country full of different peoples who struggle to find their path in society after a horrible war.

Regarding the linguistic aspect, things are a bit different. Firstly, as it has been mentioned before, the series is made to appeal to the general international public,

therefore the accents represented in it are somewhat standardised in order to be more understandable but not too much in order to make the accent appealing and characteristic. The different varieties of the English language are not too badly represented if we take into account the aforementioned standardisation. However, the major problem that this show had was the issue about the gypsies speaking Romanian instead of anglo-romani (see subsection 3.1.). It is true that it is an important error but it is also true that it is only present in the first two out of the six seasons, as they realised the error and corrected it.

Finally, as far as “Cultural Awareness” is concerned, I think that this is a very important topic as culture shapes people. For instance, in English Studies —or the study of any language— it is extremely important to learn about the culture of the people or the different peoples that speak this language in order to understand some aspects that can only be understood through culture such as: vocabulary, idioms, expressions, slang etc. You can never fully master a foreign language without being aware of its varieties and who speaks them.

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