Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 4, 2 (2012) 296-309

Space and Identity in G. B. Shaw's Plays[1]

A Pragmatic Approach

Zsuzsanna AJTONY

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania
Department of Humanities
ajtonyzsuzsa@yahoo.com

Abstract. This paper is an afterthought of a longer project on the verbal representations of Britain and Britishness in G. B. Shaw's plays. In this study I consider the spatial revolution defined by Carl Schmitt (1997 [1954]) as a source of attitude change developed within the British cultural space towards their own island and the Continent. Verbally overt and covert aspects of the British space are considered in a series of selected Shavian plays, discussing the attitude of Shaw's characters towards their island and their fellow-islanders, their verbal behaviour as defined by the cultural and historical space in which they exist. In the pragmatic analysis of the literary fragments the interactional microsociolinguistic method is applied, i.e. texts are considered as a sociolinguistic corpus on which the characters' verbal behaviour is investigated.

Keywords: spatial revolution, cultural space, language use, politeness, stereotypes

1. Preliminaries

In *The History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956-58), Sir Winston Churchill, one of Great Britain's finest statesmen calls the British an "island race". He claims that living on an island, being surrounded by sea, affects the inhabitants'

[1] The study has been written as part of the project "Discourses of Space" funded by the Institute for Research Programmes, Sapientia Foundation, Cluj.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

character and culture. The qualities of the British he admired most are their particular steadfastness in the face of adversity and a willingness to go to any length to defend the island they call home. But this "island race" also has the capacity to leave this secure home and set out across the sea surrounding their island and master it.[2]

As a result, it is supposed that the British have a common character or culture, which is shaped by the experience of inhabiting an island. There are many different ways in which the sea and land can be imagined, or experienced, or constructed. What became the dominant British view is only one of such views: the experience of **land** as mostly "enclosed" and privately owned coupled with **sea** as free and open. Land and sea denote two separate values: the value of being settled and the value of roving the world. This is the experience of the tension between "roots" and "routes" (Clark 2005).

The source of this double outlook is explained by Carl Schmitt in his essay *Land and Sea* (1997 [1954]). He claims that the beginning of the 16th century brought a spatial revolution in the world: the universal space of Christianity started to fall apart. The key sources of this spatial revolution were the great geographical discoveries, the cease of the monopoly of the Aristotelian spatial conception and the discovery of the possibility that writing can be multiplied.

This is the time when England[3] became a maritime power. Before this glorious age, all through its history, starting from the colonising Celts, through the Roman and Norman conquests, up to the time of Joan of Arc, she was considered an island from a geographical viewpoint. "The inhabitants of this island felt that they were living inside a well-defined redoubt" (Schmitt 1997: 49). England was "sheltered by the sea as a fortress by its moat" (ibid.). This insular consciousness, however, referred to the "old island", i.e. "a piece of land separated from the Continent and surrounded by water" (ibid. 50). The 16th century brought about a fundamental change: "Henceforth, the land would be looked at from the sea, and the island would cease to be seen as a split chipped from the Continent, but rather as part of the sea: a ship or a fish" (ibid.). The maritime and global supremacy of England brought about a turn in her relations with the rest of the world. England was no longer felt to be part of Europe. The "Continent" was lent a retrograde connotation and its nations, as a result, were thought of as backward people.

2. Space and communication

In this paper I consider space, in general, and the British geographical space, in particular, as a frame of reference, i.e. an entity that influences actions, "a set of

[2] Obviously, the notion of "island race" is understood as "island culture" or "island ethnic group".

[3] I am using the terms "England" and "Britain" interchangeably being aware of the fact that they do not mean the same. Whenever there is specific reference to either of them, I will refer to them separately.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

empirical possibilities made available for a [social] actor to experience his or her environment in a structured way." (Zierhofer 2002: 21) In this view, space influences actions, and speech acts – interpreted as a subclass of social action – can similarly have this effect. But this influence is mutual: "communication is regarded as a meta-level which provides the possibility to reflect upon physical conditions" (ibid. 20). Speech acts can contribute to the discursive construction of society. Language as an instrument allows speakers to represent reality (cf. the ideational function of language) but also "has the potential to explain, criticize, plan or regulate all related and relevant activities" (ibid. 12) (cf. language used as a means of communication, the class of performatives in Speech Act Theory).

A further argument for the importance of space in human communication is the fact that space is the realm of relative constancy (as opposed to time). Accordingly, this constant physical (geographical) space produces its own "race". I consider that the relatively small size of the island, and consequently the density of the population partially accounts for the characteristics that have become the stereotypical features of the British. These have been summarised by the anthropologist Kate Fox in her book *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (2005) in the following way:

> This is not just an island, but a relatively small, very overcrowded island, and it is not too hard to see how such conditions might produce a reserved, privacy-obsessed, territorial, socially wary, uneasy and sometimes obnoxious anti-social people; a negative politeness culture[4] whose courtesy is primarily concerned with the avoidance of intrusion and imposition; and acutely class-conscious culture, preoccupied with status and *boundaries and demarcations*[5]*;* a society characterized by awkwardness, embarrassment, obliqueness, fear of intimacy/ emotion/fuss (…) (Fox 2005, 413).

This description can be considered valid over longer periods of time as an essential feature of stereotypes (see Hilton and von Hippel 1996). In the following, the Shavian outlook on Britain and the British cultural space will be considered as it is overtly or covertly revealed by his characters' verbal manifestations. Through an analysis of their discourse the presence of these same ethnic stereotypes produced by the cultural anthropologists in the 21st century will be investigated.

[4] Negative politeness culture (as defined by Brown and Levinson 1987) is essentially trying to avoid intrusion into other people's private sphere.

[5] Emphasis is mine.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

3. The playwright and his island

The Victorian view on the British cultural space is clearly reflected and – at the same time – ironically contested by the leading dramatist of the age, George Bernard Shaw. Due to his assumed double (English and Irish) identity, the notion of ethnicity, in general, and Britishness,[6] its specific insular[7] version, form a perpetual theme of his best-known plays and is dealt with – either directly or indirectly – in several others. Ethnicity can be considered as the defining element of Shaw's cultural identity and assumed Britishness, which is transparent in the text(ure) of most plays, or which explicitly appears in the form of direct references in some others, as well as in Prefaces or Afterwords.[8] A vein of ethnic discourse appears in the form of generic sentences or comments about different ethnic groups, having a stereotypical value.

This paper outlines a series of direct and indirect references to the British Isles, as a physical/geographical space, in the form of examples taken from Shavian plays. Firstly, I illustrate how the British islands, as a spatial element, define the characters' ethnic identity (ethnic space) as it appears in the Shavian characters' speech.

Secondly, spatial Britain is also present indirectly, in the different characters' ethnic identity (in our case, Britishness), i.e. in their (stereo)typical way of speaking, namely in their politeness, ethos of communication, in their attitude towards other islanders and foreigners, their typical inclination towards certain topics and their inhibition regarding others. As members of the most powerful empire of the time, their sense of superiority and sense of duty are also detectable.

[6] As the historian Linda Colley (1994) argues, Britishness was a separate identity alongside other identities, and it was "forged" between 1707 and 1837 in conflict with an external "other" (war with Catholic France confirmed the centrality of Protestantism in Britishness). In this paper I am using the term "Britishness" in its traditional, historical sense, referring to the four constituting "nations": the English, the Welsh, the Scottish and the Irish, and not in the sense used by "The British" today, i.e. those people who (have) live(d) within the United Kingdom to identify themselves related to their actual political, economic, social, cultural and personal surrounding. For this relation, Britishness – and hence, any kind of ethnic and national identity – is not stable, it has always been in the process of formation. As Homi Bhabha comments, a nation is always "caught, uncertainly, in the act of composing itself" (1990, 3). However, in order to capture the defining traits of Britishness/Englishness in this continuous process of formation, I have chosen to approach them in the form of cultural and ethnic stereotypes, which prove to be more or less constant elements of analyses.

[7] The term "insular" is emphatically used here in its basic, derogatory sense, meaning "having no interest in or contact with people and ideas from outside one's own country or society" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*), as this meaning is thought to characterize best the English ethnic stereotype.

[8] Shaw frequently reflects upon his own cultural and ethnic identity in these Prefaces or Notes written to the plays, which sometimes turn to be much more extensive and explanatory than the play they precede.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

3.1. Direct references to Britain as an island

The most direct reference to Britain as an island in the plays that I have analysed appears in *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) in the discourse of a character, called Britannus, who becomes the typical representative of the English stereotype. Although he is of inferior social rank (Caesar's slave), he is introduced to the other characters by the emperor himself, almost apologetically:

(1) CAESAR [*blandly*] Ah, I forgot. I have not made my companions known here. Pothinus: this is Britannus, my secretary. **He is an islander from the western end of the world, a day's voyage from Gaul**.[9] [*Britannus bows stiffly.*] (p. 162)[10]

This precise geographical definition reflects the description of the world in those times when Rome was still considered the centre of civilisation: in Caesar's view Britain lies "at the end of the world". This attitude echoes the first-century Greek scholar, Strabo, who describes Britain lying in the far distance, near the limits of inhabitable lands. He also claims that the further north one travels, the wilder the lands and the people become. "Britain is remote from the Mediterranean centre of civilization, and its inhabitants are unattractive brutes whose customs are barbaric." (Michelet 2005: 52)

However, as Britannus' verbal behaviour betrays it, he speaks and behaves as a stereotypical 19th-century British character, who considers himself the illuminator of the world. Several times he expresses his moral superiority towards the Roman or Egyptian characters, even towards his master, the emperor himself, crying out scandal whenever they seem to have broken the laws of his well-defined middle-class morality:

(2) CAESAR [*recovering his self-possession*] Pardon him, Theodotus; **he is a barbarian, and thinks that the customs of his tribe and island are the law of nature**.[11]
BRITANNUS. On the contrary, Caesar, it is these Egyptians who are barbarians; and you do wrong to encourage them. I say it is a scandal. (p. 165)

[9] The bold emphasis is mine.
[10] The page numbers refer to the 1965 edition of *Caesar and Cleopatra*.
[11] My emphasis.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

(3) BRITANNUS [*with genuine feeling*] O Caesar, my great master, if I could but persuade you to regard life seriously, as men do in **my** country! (p. 198)

The secretary is also identified by the geographical space of origin, being called "the (British) islander" and this becomes his constant form of address, e.g.:

(4) CAESAR. Is Britannus asleep? I sent him for my armour an hour ago. [*Calling*] Britannicus, thou British islander. Britannicus! (p. 181)

(5) RUFIO. Well, my British islander… (p. 196)

(6) RUFIO [*rising*] Caesar: when the islander has finished preaching, call me again. (p.198)

(7) CAESAR. […] O incorrigible British islander (p. 198)

(8) CAESAR. Where is that British Islander[12] of mine? (p. 238)

Additionally, this islander is "quaint" as well. According to the dictionary definition, quaint is "interesting or attractive with a slightly strange and old-fashioned quality" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). This description perfectly fits Britannus and with him, the image the world has about the British stereotype.

There are several other hints at Britain and the British stereotype in the Shavian text, e.g. Britain is called by Caesar "*the western land of romance*", "*the last piece of earth on the edge of the ocean that surrounds the world*" (p. 222) – according to the "general egocentricity of the Ptolemaic universe" (Morgan 1972: 242); the British pearl and the British oyster that become metonymies of this island.

In another play England is indirectly called "John Bull's[13] island" referring to the jolly figure of John Bull, John Arbuthnot's leading character, who has come to

[12] British Islander is spelt in capital letters as if it were his full name. This spelling underpins his complete identification with his "island-consciousness", insularity defined as a typical feature of Englishness. The social anthropologist Kate Fox explains the typical English dis-ease less with the climate or history, but more with the fact that, as she claims, "we are an island race" (2005: 413).

[13] John Arbuthnot's creation is an English hero, who was a tradesman, "an honest, plain dealing fellow, choleric, bold and of a very unconstant temper", unafraid of anyone, but liable to quarrel with his neighbours "especially if they pretended to govern him". His mood "depended very much upon the air; his spirits rose and fell with the weather glass. John was quick and understood his business very well, but no man alive was more careless in looking into his accounts, or more cheated by his partners, apprentices and servants. This was occasioned by his being a boon companion, loving his bottle and his diversion; for to say truth, no man kept a better house than John, nor spent his money more generously." (Arbuthnot quoted in Paxman 1998: 184).

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

personify the English nation. The English chose this tradesman as their national symbol who befits a nation of shopkeepers and who is

> fiercely independent and proud, drinks heavily and possesses a truly bovine stolidity. He is also temperamental, whining, insensitive (…), always pot-bellied, solid, peaceable and a bit dozy. (…) he believes in Law and Order and is instinctively conservative. He is home-loving, reliable, jolly, honest, practical and fiercely attached to his freedoms. (Paxman 1998: 185)

The motif of the island also appears symbolically in Caesar's identification with the Sphinx: he expresses his loneliness and isolation, similar to the great stone colossus in the desert:

(9) CAESAR. (…) no air native to me, no man kindred to me, none who can do my day's deed, and think my night's thought. Sphinx, you and I, strangers to the race of men, are no strangers to one another (…) Rome is a madman's dream: this is my Reality. My way hither was the way of destiny; for I am he of whose genius you are the symbol: *part brute, part woman, and part god* [14] – nothing of man in me at all. (p. 146)

In the play Caesar is presented first of all as a Roman emperor, the great conqueror of the western world. However, even the first lines of his speech betray his real feelings towards his status: he feels uncomfortable in it. The metaphor "*Rome is a madman's dream*" expresses a certain distancing, departure from his own ethnic group and society, and identification with the world of the lonely sphinx, acceptance of the world of isolation ("*this is my Reality*"). The antonymic nouns "dream" and "reality" especially highlight this discrepancy between these two worlds, emphasised also by the fact that the word "dream" is spelt with lower case letters, while "Reality" is capitalised. This sense of isolation draws him closer to the British stereotype of living on an island. In this sense he is closer to the British prototype than Britannus.

A character's identification with his own ethnic space is also detectable in Thomas Broadbent's speech in *John Bull's Other Island*:

(10) BROADBENT. No, Larry, no. You are thinking of the modern hybrids that now monopolize England. Hypocrites, humbugs, Germans, Jews, Yankees, foreigners, Park Laners, cosmopolitan riffraff. Dont[15] call them

[14] Emphasis is mine.

[15] The simplified spelling (omission of the apostrophe) is an idiosyncratic feature of Shaw's writings.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

> English. They dont belong to **the dear old island**, but to **their**[16] confounded new empire; and by George! theyre worthy of it; and I wish them joy of it. (p. 77[17])

Broadbent, the ethnic English character expresses his deep affection for his homeland, calling it "the dear old island". The adjective "dear" suggests devotion to his homeland; the other adjective ("old") adds familiarity to the noun. The noun "island" stands as a metaphor for Britain, thus the speaker identifying himself with the people inhabiting the island, but at the same time detaching himself from the outgroup who shape the empire, represented by the pronoun of exclusion "them".

It is but natural that **Ireland** also appears as a separate space in the Shavian oeuvre, as it is geographically and politically related to the British islands, not to mention the argument of the playwright's ethnic origin. The most relevant representation of the parallel image of England and Ireland is *John Bull's Other Island*. The only time when the Irish ethnic character, Larry Doyle, is overwhelmed by emotions is when he speaks of his home country, expressing his ambivalent feelings towards it:

> (11) LARRY (*now thoroughly roused*). (…) Is Ireland never to have a chance? First **she** was given to the rich; and now that they have gorged on **her** flesh, **her** bones are to be flung to the poor, that can do nothing but suck the marrow out of her. (p. 117)

This affection is observable in the country's personification in his discourse: it appears in the metaphor of a helpless female personality, who is exploited to the maximum and for whom only pity can be felt. The passive structures (*was given*, *are to be flung*) underline this helplessness. The rhetorical question at the beginning of the utterance expresses the speaker's indignation and gives the tone for the subsequent propositions, which enlist a series of vivid pictures describing the process of exploitation of this island.

However, the character sees the rise of Ireland and expresses his will to try and raise his country from this desperate situation:

> (12) LARRY. (…) I want Ireland to be the brains and imagination of a big Commonwealth, not a Robinson Crusoe island. (p. 83)

The intertextual reference implies Larry's rejection of the deserted island that the main character of Defoe's novel finds when shipwrecked but also the

[16] Bold emphases are mine.
[17] The page numbers refer to the 1977 edition of *John Bull's Other Island*.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

colonising role he assumes in the process of civilising the land and its native inhabitant.

3.2. Indirect references

The British Isles – as a geographical/cultural space – not only appear as a direct reference in the Shavian plays, but they also emerge as indirect references in various forms. Among such references, in this section of the study, the following are considered: the stereotypical subject matters that the characters speak about or try to avoid; secondly, a typical interactional ethos that the different characters assume; thirdly, different politeness strategies (see Brown and Levinson 1987) they employ in their conversations with each other, and, fourthly, the way the (stereo)typical British humour and irony is present in their verbal interactions.

What is typical about the ethnic British characters' speech is their consistent use of negative politeness strategies in their face-to-face conversations. The most relevant examples can be taken from Britannus' speech in *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Britannus belongs to the western group of characters who employ negative politeness (apologising, employing hedges) and off-record strategies (using rhetorical questions, being ironic), he being the most polite (in the traditional sense of the word), even "ultra-polite" among them. This may be due – first of all – to his being British but also to his social status, being Caesar's slave: he cannot be but extremely polite to those of higher social rank around him.

(13) BRITANNUS. Caesar: I ask you to excuse the language that escaped me in the heat of the moment. (p. 238)

(14) BRITANNUS. Have you not been there? Have you not seen them? What Briton speaks as you do in your moments of levity? What Briton neglects to attend the services at the sacred grove? What Briton wears clothes of many colours as you do, instead of plain blue, as all solid, well esteemed men should? These are moral questions with us. (p. 198)

Similarly, Mrs Pearce, Professor Higgins' housekeeper in *Pygmalion*, has an extremely polite language behaviour. This can be explained by her social status, i.e. of a lower social rank; so when she addresses the professor, her social status requires that she should employ more elaborate, more polite forms.

(15) MRS PEARCE. [*at the door*] I just wish to trouble you with a word, if I may, Mr Higgins. (p. 50)

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

(16) MRS PEARCE. [...] Then *might* I ask you not to come down to breakfast in your dressing-gown ... And *if you would be so good* as not to eat everything off the same plate and *to remember* not to put the porridge saucepan out of your hand on the clean tablecloth, it would be a better example to the girl. (p. 52)

It can be seen that in the previous examples, in fact she is asking her superior to do or not to do something, but the imperatives are preceded by hedges to avoid threatening her interlocutor's face directly. She is applying negative politeness strategies, a common conversational strategy in British culture.

(17) MRS PEARCE. Well, the matter is, sir, that you cant[18] take a girl up like that as if you were picking up a pebble on the beach. (p. 42)

She considers morals and proper language the most important issues in life and she considers it her duty to protect morals in the house. She is not posing with this responsibility, but she honestly believes that morals keep life going. She is so careful about the use of foul language in the house that she even uses the modal verb of prohibition (*must not swear*) to instruct her master about his moral behaviour (similar to Britannus in *Caesar and Cleopatra*). In this sense, she is a stricter guardian to Higgins than Mrs Higgins herself. She draws the professor's attention to his insensitivity and cold superhuman attitude he has towards other people, but in a polite way, using hedges (*well, the matter is*) and addressing the professor with deferential forms of address (*sir*).

Thomas Broadbent, the English character from *John Bull's Other Island*, is also a case in point. His negative politeness is often revealed in his attitude to other interactional partners, employing such negative politeness strategies as giving deference (by thanking or apologising):

(18) BROADBENT. Quite, thank you. You must excuse us for not waiting for you. (p. 105)

(19) BROADBENT (*effusively cordial*). Thank you, Father Dempsey. Delighted to have met you, sir. (p. 98)

On the one hand, thanking and excusing oneself are strategies that threaten the speaker's negative face, on the other hand, apologies threaten the speaker's positive face. At the same time a basic claim for personal preserves is asserted

[18] The simplified verb form (without the apostrophe) is one of Shaw's suggestions to reform the English spelling.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

together with a desire that this self-image should be appreciated and approved of (Brown & Levinson 1987: 61). This double aspiration can be interpreted in Broadbent's verbal interaction as gestures of an ambiguous and paradoxical self that wants an inner territory, freedom of action but at the same time appreciation.

His way of apologising is often introduced by hedges in order to mitigate the force of his face threatening acts, which is also a negative politeness strategy:

(20) BROADBENT. *You see*[19], as a stranger and an Englishman, I thought it would be interesting to see the Round Tower by moonlight. (p. 101)

(21) BROADBENT. Oh, *I'm afraid* it's too late for tea. (p. 97)
(22) BROADBENT (…) *Pardon my saying these few words*: nobody feels their impertinence more than I do. (p. 122)

However, one can witness not only the presence of these negative politeness strategies in the characters' verbal behaviour, but – typical of Shaw – also their contestation: i.e. the way impoliteness also permeates the same characters' discourse. Britannus, for instance, also has several more direct utterances where he openly attacks his interlocutor's face whether he does so to his own master or to the Queen of Egypt, addressees of the highest rank around. In a sense, he has an excuse to contradict Caesar: his pretended moral superiority, which gives him enough courage to face his master:

(23) BRITANNUS. Caesar: this is not good sense. Your duty to Rome demands that her enemies should be prevented from doing further mischief. [*Caesar, whose delight in the moral eye-to-business of his British secretary is inexhaustible, smiles indulgently*.]

There are further instances of such stiff, uncompromising behaviour on the part of Britannus, when, for example, he refers to one's sense of duty, honour or respectability and most of all, manners, which are the greatest values of the British stereotype, e.g.:

(24) BRITANNUS. Caesar: Pothinus demands speech of you. In my opinion, he needs a lesson. His manner is most insolent. (p. 177)

As a secretary, he needs to use such formal language ("Pothinus demands speech of you" instead of "wants to speak to you") but what follows is more than what his social status would allow him to say. He expresses his personal opinion by

[19] The italicised words are my emphases, highlighting the hedges in Broadbent's words.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

overtly articulating it and suggesting, or to put it more plainly, demanding punishment for him because of his manners.

Similarly, in certain cases, Mrs Pearce in *Pygmalion* also applies more direct face threatening acts: she even scolds her master for disobeying the moral code of society.

(25) MRS PEARCE. Nonsense, sir. You mustnt talk like that to her. (p. 42)

This elliptical structure conversationally implies: "You are talking nonsense". Even this evaluative declarative is followed by a polite form of address. She does not forget the social status of her interlocutor, even in such an emotion-loaded situation. The follow-up contains again the modal verb of prohibition, which is again another FTA, but still milder than a direct imperative.

Based on the above, it can be claimed that the predominance of negative politeness strategies in the different characters' utterances indicates that they belong to a negative politeness culture – the British (see Sifianou 1999). Conventional indirectness, the chief characteristic of negative politeness, is equated with politeness and this contributes to the elaboration of the structure and the tentativeness of the message. Accordingly, in negative politeness cultures the interactional ethos ("the quality of interaction characterizing groups or social categories of persons, in a particular society" – see Brown and Levinson 1987: 243) that defines the Shavian characters' verbal behaviour, is characterised by an ideal of large values for D [distance], P [power] and R [rate of imposition] which give them their "hierarchical, paternal ethos" (ibid. 247). As a result, the characters' interaction with other characters is generally stiff, formal and deferential.

Indirectness is also related to the presence of humour and irony in British culture. In the Shavian oeuvre one of the most relevant instances is the case of General Burgoyne in *The Devil's Disciple*. His peculiar sense of humour,[20] which is present even in the most morbid circumstances (e.g. in the scene when Anderson rescues Richard at the last moment) and his composure, his presence of mind, and his cold-bloodedness in emotion-loaded situations, all make his a stereotypically English character. He is able to keep his temper and approach every situation with cool irony. A good example of his humour is the instance when he criticises his own officer, Major Swindon, for not using his brain to save his soldiers from sure death and when

[20] When analysing their own politicians' speeches and political statements, English journalists firmly agree that in order "to be properly English you must have a sense of humour". "English sense of humour is defined mainly by three things: the use of irony; the exposure of self-deception; a tendency towards fantasy and excess. All of these features appear in other national cultures, are indeed part of humour in general. I would claim, [however], that this cluster of features is more condensed in the English tradition than elsewhere, and that irony, exposure of self-deception and the pleasures of fantasy can all be related back to a tradition of empiricism." (Easthope 1999: 163)

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

he feels compassion for the common soldier. His humour is bitter, he does not even try to save his interlocutor's (Swindon's) face, directly attacking him.

(26) BURGOYNE [*bitterly*] (…) the British officer need not know his business: the British soldier will get him out of all his blunders with the bayonet. In future, sir, I must ask you to be a little less generous with the blood of your men, and a little more generous with your own brains. (p. 97)

He ironically expresses exactly the opposite of what his words mean at their face value ("the British officer need not know his business"). It does not appear as a stage direction but the reader may infer or the audience may hear the ironic tone in his voice. The second part of his remark ("In future, sir…") is to be interpreted as an indirect speech act, an order, although it is formulated in the form of a strong request ("I must ask you"), complemented with the honorific "sir". He contrasts the blood of the common British soldier with the brains of his own officer, linking them through the adjective "generous", but this being preceded by the quantifiers "less" and "more". Dark humour arises from this opposition. The negative connotation of this humour emerges from the metonymies "blood" (standing for the soldiers' lives that may be lost because of their officer's stupidity) and "brains" (in this context not referring to the bodily organ but to the intellectual capacity of its owner).

4. Conclusions

These analyses of the verbal representation of British space in the selected Shavian fragments have shown similar results to those that current research on the spatial representations of British identities (see Tönnies & Buschmann (eds.) 2012) have come to. These results show that spaces have a "real", material, physical side (the geographical reference), but they are also endowed with a whole range of cultural meanings, which are closely connected with the social and personal construction of the characters' identity. The analyses have also come to similar results as the stereotypical features described by cultural anthropology (see Fox above). Where there is significant divergence from the stereotype is in the case of impoliteness. These characters follow but also exceed the limits of the British stereotype. This may be ascribed to the Shavian artistic freedom, which allows for the creation of complex and modern characters, much transcending their own time.

Representations of space/spaces in literary texts – pertinent examples of which I have explored above in extracts taken from Shavian plays – provide an insight into the characters' identity. Geographical space, as a result, may play a significant part in shaping the identity of its inhabitants but it does not offer the final answer.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)

References

Primary references:

Shaw, George Bernard. 1965 [1898]. Caesar and Cleopatra. In: *Three Plays for Puritans*, 129-254. Harmondworth: Penguin Books.

--- 1965 [1897]. The Devil's Disciple. In *Three Plays for Puritans*, 43-126. Harmondworth: Penguin Books.

--- 1977 [1904]. John Bull's Other Island. In *Selections from Shaw: A Fearless Champion of the Truth*, 63-161. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Secondary references:

Bhabha, Homi K. ed. 1990. *Nation and Narration*. London and New York: Routledge.

Brown, Penelope & Stephen Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Churchill, Winston. 2011. *The History of the English-Speaking Peoples.* New York: Skyhorse Publishing Company.

Clark, Nigel. 2005. *An Island Race?* http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/island-race. (15 March 2012)

Colley, Linda. 1994. *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*. London: Pimlico.

Easthope, Antony. 1999. *Englishness and National Culture*. London & New York: Routledge.

Fox, Kate. 2005. *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. London: Hodder.

Hilton, J. L. & von Hippel, W. 1996. Stereotypes. *Annual Review of Psychology* 47: 237-71.

Michelet, Fabienne. 2005 Centrality, Marginality and Distance: Britain's Changing Location on the Map of the World. In David Spurr and Cornelia, Tschichold (eds.), *The Space of English.* 51-68. Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag.

Morgan, Margery. 1972. *The Shavian Playground*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd.

Paxman, Jeremy. 1998. *The English: A Portrait of a People*. London: Penguin Books.

Schmitt, Carl. 1997. *Land and Sea*. Translated and foreword by Simona Draghici. Washington: Plutarch Press.

Sifianou, Maria. 1999. *Politeness Phenomena in England and Greece. A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tönnies, Merle and Heike Buschmann (eds.). 2012. *Spatial Representations of British Identities*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag.

Zierhofer, Wolfgang. 2002. *Speech Acts and Space(s). Language Pragmatics and the Discursive Construction of the Social*. Working Papers Series 2002/1. Nijmegen: University of Nijmegen School of Management.

BDD-A7531 © 2012 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:32 UTC)