

International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction



Discourses of Othering

Fred Dervin

University of Helsinki, Finland

Email Address: fred.dervin@helsinki.fi

Word Count: 4458 words

Abstract:

Othering is an interdisciplinary notion that refers, amongst other things, to differentiating discourses that lead to moral and political judgment of superiority and inferiority between 'us' and 'them', and within groups. Critical approaches to othering examine its construction in social interaction and take into account both power relations and the intersectionality of different identity markers. Researchers increasingly pay attention to their own contribution to othering.

Main Text:

The other has been a major figure throughout history, defined by different labels: *the Barbarian* in Ancient Greece (an onomatopoeia for jabbering), *the (Noble) Savage* in the 17th Century and, *(radical) alterity* in the 21st Century. During colonization and conquest of the Americas in 16th century Spain two camps were opposed in the Valladoid debate as to the position of Amerindians from the New World: should these others be treated as men or as slaves? Repeatedly until today these questions have emerged in relation to different kinds of others worldwide (Indigenous people in Australia, Human zoos in America and Europe, South Africa's Apartheid, the war in Darfur, etc.) But the other is not a uniform figure; there is in fact a hierarchy between different kinds of others in the ways they are treated or talked about. In Europe, for example, certain migrants are better treated than others, depending on their origins, economic capitals and languages.

The other is also every one of us. Many famous people have written about this understanding of the other. The Greek philosopher Aristotle affirmed: "the self-sufficing man will require friendship in order to know himself" (*Magna Moralia*); the French poet Arthur Rimbaud famously said "I is another" (1871) and more recently the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing insisted that "Each person is the other to the others" (1967).

The other and the notion that derives from it, otherness, is an interdisciplinary concept *par excellence*. As such, it has been dealt with in fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics but also theology, archeology, history and gender studies. The other has in fact been the core of the Human and Social Sciences

since their development in the 18th century. The field of anthropology for instance was interested in the “exotic” other from its beginning until about the end of the Second World War. Today, after years of debate and criticisms of past anthropological work, most anthropologists work on globalized societies and refrain from exoticising the populations they look at. Philosophy and especially ontology (the study of being) is also concerned with otherness. The interest in the other and otherness seems to have increased exponentially in research since the emergence of post-structuralist/post-modern perspectives and the crisis of belonging that has marked our globalized world since the 1980s. Different figures of otherness, beyond the “exotic other”, have also been the attention of media and literary production worldwide (e.g. sexual minorities, the disabled, etc.).

The idea of *othering* (sometimes written as *otherizing*) derives from the presence of others in our societies. It is also very much related to the concept of identity, which has been highly discussed in the academia over the last decades. Othering means turning the other into an other, thus creating a boundary between different and same, insiders and outsiders. Emotional and cognitive mechanisms leading to othering are articulated linguistically and co-constructed interactively. For Chebel d’Appollonia (2011: 11) othering corresponds to the “taxidermy of identity” as it tends to confine the other to a restricted understanding of who she is and what she represents.

In psychology othering is an ordinary process that everyone experiences: in order to exist, one needs to make sense of other people, thus one *others* them – as much as they *other* the rest of us. Othering is only possible through the hyphenation or the nexus of self and other in discourse. In order to other, one needs to compare self to other, or one’s group(s) to (an)other group(s) and vice versa.

In sociology, amongst others, othering refers to differentiating discourses that lead to moral and political judgment of superiority and inferiority between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In this understanding of othering power is always employed in representing other and self. The other is also often described through a deficit framework, i.e. she is not as good or capable as ‘we’ are, that leads to stereotypes and other forms of representation. This often takes place in the media, public discourses and even in scholarly work (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012). The literary theorist Edward Said (1978) made use of this macro-approach to othering in his work on Orientalism where he demonstrated how the representation of the Orient (especially the Middle East) as passive, mysterious and inferior, has allowed Occidentals to define themselves in positive terms.

Othering can relate to many and varied identity markers: nationality, race, language, religion, gender, etc. Othering is often accompanied with the idea that some groups are dehumanized or demonized as they are deemed to be inferior. However othering can also take place within a ‘powerless’ group through self-othering. This is the case e.g. of the use of the words ‘Oreos’ (in reference to the sandwich cookie which is black from the outside and white inside) and ‘Bananas’ by respectively Afro-Americans and Asians to refer to people who are black/‘yellow’ on the outside but stereotypically white on the inside. In some cases self-othering can serve as a way of defending oneself, claiming authority and even asking for special rights – which is not always a good thing, especially if other rights are violated. Spokespeople for certain religions, cultures and sexual minorities do not always represent the “majority” and have their own agendas. The

image that they construct of their identities does not always match those of their peers, who feel that they are being othered by these spokespeople.

With the birth of Modernity in 18th century Europe, amongst others, national identities became some of the most salient tools of othering, leading to e.g. (de-/neo-)colonization, World Wars and the Holocaust. Today, even though Nation-States are losing some of their power the economic dimensions of identity formation, such as Nation-branding or Country-as-company for e.g. tourism, are still leading to certain forms of Othering where the Other is artificially produced, often recycling century-old representation or creating new ones.

In educational discourses othering has become a phenomenon that needs to be discussed openly, banished or fought against as it can lead to e.g. racism, sexism or even bigotry. However, in his report on anti-racism education in Britain A. Hart (2013) shows how educators themselves can contribute to discourses of othering by pushing forward a flawed anti-racism agenda:

(1) (Hart, 2013: 26)

I filmed a session where my drama tutor colleagues were (as they saw it) facilitating a process through which children could embrace and feel good about their ethnic identity. Children were asked 'we sometimes identify ourselves as white or black or Asian or mixed – how would you identify yourself?' Our boy mumbles his answer. 'Ah, a dark skinned person', says the drama tutor. 'No, a DANCING person!' exclaims the boy.

The labeling of persons, with the best intentions of respect and tolerance, can easily lead to othering or as is the case in this excerpt 'boxing' a person wrongly. For many researchers 'national education' has often been used as a way of contributing to othering and deciding who fits in and who does not.

Othering as an unstable phenomenon

Othering is a complex phenomenon, which might differ overtime, depending on how collective and intersubjectively constructed ideologies evolve in specific contexts. The example of African slaves is telling: they were first perceived as pagans in 16th century America before being labeled as "negro" after 1680. Some others will remain trapped in their otherness (e.g. Gypsies in Europe) while other others will be able to enjoy more positivity in the way they are othered after a few decades (e.g. Carelians who took refuge in Finland after World War II).

The concept of (social) representation as introduced by the Romanian-born French social psychologist Moscovici (1961) is useful to make sense of othering. A representation is a system of values, ideas and practices that are shared by people and that enable them to grasp their world but also to interact with others (ibid.). This is precisely what othering allows in social interaction. The phenomena described above have taken place through the (co-)construction and (re-)negotiation of representation between self, other and contexts. In a globalized world representation is increasingly complex as meaning-making and thus othering is less predictable and certain. This has some impact:

For example one might meet someone who looks Asian but who was actually born in the same country and share the same first language as we do. This is the case of the following excerpt found on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJkN5HbQ%00>). The video, entitled “What kind of Asian are you?”, portrays a white American man and an Asian-looking lady who meet while jogging. During their encounter the man tries to other the lady by asking her about her ‘real’ origins (not American but Korean). He uses typical othering discursive strategies like foreigner talk (03), counter-arguments concerning her origins (06-08), Korean (non-)verbality (14) but also culturalist arguments (15-17). The scene ends on the lady asking the man as well where he comes from, leading him to confess – and thus to other him in her own way – that his family is also an ‘immigrant’ family:

(2) What kind of Asian are you?

01 MAN: Where are you from? Your English is perfect
02 WOMAN: San Diego we speak English there
03 MAN: No erg where are you from?
04 WOMAN: Well I was born in Orange county but I
05 never actually lived there
06 MAN: No I mean before that
07 WOMAN: Before I was born?
08 MAN: Yeah where are your people from?
09 WOMAN: Well my great-grandma was from Seoul
10 MAN: Korean I knew it I was like she is either
11 Japanese or Korean but I was leaning more
12 towards Korean
13 WOMAN: Amazing
14 MAN: (Bows and says hello in Korean)
15 There is a really good teriyaki barbecue
16 place near my apartment so actually I really
17 like kimchi
18 WOMAN: Cool. What about you, where are you from?
19 MAN: San Francisco
20 WOMAN: But where are you from?
21 MAN: I am just American
22 WOMAN: Really you’re Native American?
23 MAN: No just regular American well I guess my
24 grand-parents are from England (...)

As we can see in some contexts some people are more empowered than others to reduce the other to an other through recycling positive and/or negative representations. These representations clearly influence and create people’s actions and acts of interaction (Moscovici, 1961). In the excerpt above, though powerless at first, the lady reverses the act of othering and counter-attacks the “otherer” by behaving in a similar way to him. It is clear that othering is occurring as a way of demonstrating xenophilia (or the appreciation of the other) from the man’s perspective. Yet as much as xenophobia (or the dislike of everything foreign) xenophilia is flawed as the othering to which it leads lays the emphasis only on imagined origins and rids the woman off her freedom to emancipate

herself from these imagined cultural bonds. The woman's use of othering strategies appears to be a way of making the man understand how problematic his behavior and attitudes are.

Othering can be used for other reasons. People use it to position themselves, to defend themselves, to please/seduce the other, to claim (common/different) identities, to defend themselves against stigmatizing or marginalizing practices or to feel better about the different other. Othering also allows people to (re-)invent and make sense of the self through imagining the other. In uncertain postmodern times it is easy to see how unstable othering and the politics of identity can be.

Many and varied forms of othering have been identified in the literature. As far as the "national" and "cultural" other is concerned the following labels have been used: essentialism, racism, neo-racism (for which culture serves as a proxy for race, Dhamoon, 2009), culturalism (culture as an explanation for all), ethnocentrism, exoticism, islamophobia, orientalism. Occidentalism, or how non-Western people see the Occident and Reverse orientalism, or how Orientals use orientalist expectations to other themselves (Dervin and Gao, 2012), are two forms of othering that will need to be examined more carefully in the future as world powers shift. There is a tendency today in research to accuse the West of othering the rest of the world while, again, othering, is a universal phenomenon.

All these intercultural forms of othering, which are far from neutral, have in common the following flaws: they concentrate mostly on difference between people – and ignore the fact that people share a lot of similarities even if they come from a different place and/or speak a different language; they draw artificial boundaries between people; the way culture, religion, race is described is often one-sided and general; they give the impression that only their culture, race or religion influence their opinions, actions and attitudes. Some of these discourses of othering have led to dreadful acts such as hatred, killing, terrorism, slavery, genocides, etc. In daily interaction they can easily lead to prejudice, power imbalance/discrimination (*my culture/religion is better than yours*), and patronizing attitudes (the other is deficient).

Analysing discourses of othering

As Othering is a very interdisciplinary topic the ways its discourses can be analysed are many and multifaceted. Two social constructivist perspectives that can be combined coherently are presented.

The first approach is taken from R. Dhamoon's 2009 book entitled *Identity/Difference Politics*. Dhamoon is a scholar of Philosophy and Political Science. Examining how multiculturalism is discourses in Canada she proposes to work from the critical politics of meaning-making and how and with what effects power – rather than culture – creates difference and thus discourses of othering. By doing so she places othering – even though she does not use the term – at the centre of her work. In her analysis, Dhamoon asks a certain number of questions: How are lines of difference socially constructed in different contexts through discourse? How do they relate to power relations? Who and what is depicted as (ab-)normal and superior-inferior? (ibid.: xi). Dhamoon's approach is quite similar to two other scholars' from other fields. The sociolinguist Ingrid Piller also suggests a social constructivist approach to othering in

intercultural communication. She proposes to ask the following questions when analyzing data (2011: 17): “Who is talking? Is the speaker or writer an identifiable individual or an institution? In which role do they speak or write? Who is the intended audience? Are there any over-hearers? In case of an interaction, what are their reactions? What is the relevant context? For example, the relationship between the interactants, the time and place, the medium. What is the purpose of bringing up culture?” Breidenbach and Nyíri (2009), in their volume *Seeing Culture Everywhere*, tread a similar path when they question the “implicit and explicit assumptions behind cultural claims and the power dynamics that they may be concealing” (2009: 340). Here are some of the questions that they propose to ask ourselves (ibid.: 343): “What explicit and implicit statements about culture are involved, about which groups? What are the fault lines along which groups are defined and differentiated? (...) Who is making the statements about culture? Why might they be making them?”

What all these authors share in common is an interest in deconstructing discourses of othering in utterances about people’s culture or attitudes towards the other by examining the impact of power differentials. Yet Dhamoon (ibid.) is the only one who seems to take seriously the important feature of intersectionality in her work. Here is how she defines it: “the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts” (ibid.: 61). Her message is important: in order to examine multiculturalism, the Other, and acts of othering one must take into account more than one identity marker. Instead of concentrating e.g. only on culture as a sole contributor to othering one should also include systems of race, gender, class, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, etc. in how people identify and differentiate (ibid.: 63). In her chapter on *Accounts of Racialized Gendering*, this is exactly what she does in relation to Muslim women in Canada by looking at how forms of gendered racialization are produced through the “blending” of discourses of e.g. Orientalism, Islamophobia and Eurocentric sexism (ibid.: 132). In order to complexify our understanding and analysis of othering, intersectionality appears to be an important step.

Identifying these multiple voices can be challenging for researchers, especially if they want to “dig deeper” into their data in order to move beyond mere descriptions of othering processes and to describe the instability of these discourses. Bakhtin’s Dialogism (1982) but also methods from the interdisciplinary movement of research on the Dialogical Self, which is inspired by Bakhtin, Mead and Hegel can be very rewarding in this sense. Dialogism is based mainly on the argument that otherness is at the centre of everything (Bakhtin, 1982). In other words dialogue should be the basic unit of analysis when analyzing such dynamic and contextual phenomena as knowledge, society and subjectivity (Gillespie and Cornish, 2010: 15). Furthermore the social, historical and cultural context in which the phenomena under scrutiny take place should be fully integrated in the analysis. Bakhtin’s theory places the concept of *voice* at the centre of discourse. Roulet (2011: 209) summarizes the Russian philosopher’s ideas as follows:

- There is constant interplay between multiple voices in discourse and society;
- Any discourse is always associated with former discourses and voices;
- Any discourse is always a reaction to previous discourses and thus enters into dialogue with these discourses;

- Other persons are thus always present in what people say.

Analysing discourses of othering thus requires examining these elements. For Grossen (2010: 7), “One key-element of a dialogical approach is that language is fundamentally polysemic and that its meaning is not predetermined by the linguistic code but constructed within a certain discursive situation”. This means that in terms of research methods we should use approaches that allow moments of intersubjectivity to emerge (Gillespie and Cornish, 2010). Linguistically speaking, dialogism is marked by the apparition of certain linguistic markers or forms (pronouns such as *we*; reported discourses; passive voice; etc.). Dialogists call reported discourse (direct or indirect), discourse representation (Roulet, 2011: 210) as, being reported from another context, it *represents* discourses and actions. Certain phenomena such as irony, negation, the use of certain discourse markers such as *but* all signal dialogism. These examples are taken from Roulet (ibid.: 215-216):

- (uttered in a situation of evident failure): what a triumph! (irony)
- Paul is big; yet, he is not strong (negation).

In her 2010 article M. Grossen asks herself if and how researchers can develop tools of analysis that are suitable for dialogism – especially as not all voices to contribute to discoursing are identifiable. Even though her conclusions confirm the gap between a complex theory and tools that are unable to grasp it fully, her article offers a few hints at how the sets of questions from Dhamoon, Piller and Breidenbach and Nyiri could work in order to examine othering. Her first proposal is to use linguistic methods that can show how discourse navigates from one speaker to another and how discourse is integrated and reinvested (ibid.: 17): the shift of personal pronouns, the speaker’s position(s) (teacher, woman, doctor...) and argumentative contradictions. French *énonciation* (often called French pragmatics) appears to be a good complement to work on Dialogism. Johansson and Suomela-Salmi (2011: 71) explain: “enunciation deals with utterance-level meaning from the perspective of different linguistic elements. In other words, the activity of the speaker is the focus: on the one hand there are traces and indices left by the speaker in the utterance; on the other hand there is the relationship the speaker maintains with her/his interlocutor”. In short, *énonciation* approaches are interested in 1. How a person constructs her/his discourse and 2. How s/he negotiates the discourse with others (intersubjectivity). One central aspect of *énonciation* is to consider a speaker as a heterogeneous subject, meaning an individual who positions her/himself in interaction with others and who thus uses and manages various discursive and pragmatic strategies to construct the self, the other, surroundings, experiences, etc. This also takes place in often unplanned, unsystematic and changing manners.

The most famous representatives of French pragmatics are Émile Benveniste, Antoine Culioli, Oswald Ducrot and Catherine Kerbrat-Orechionni (cf. Johansson and Suomela-Salmi, 2011). Many and varied linguistic elements have been examined to analyse enunciation. Deictics (markers of person, time and space such as personal pronouns, adverbs and verbs) are such elements, which allow speakers to “stage themselves or make themselves manifest in utterances, or on the other hand may decide to distance themselves from it, leaving no explicit signs of their presence or manifesting their attitude in utterances” (Johansson and Suomela-Salmi, 2011: 94). The same goes for

utterance modalities, which can give us a clue about the attitude of the speaker towards what s/he is saying (adverbs, shifters, etc.). For example deontic modalities mark an obligation and relate to moral and social norms (ex: You must do this) (Johansson and Suomela-Salmi, *ibid.*: 97). Nouns may also express the attitude of a speaker towards a person, a phenomenon, an object, etc. (Paul is a *lazybone*). It is easy to see how enunciative markers can help the researcher to analyse how people co-construct who they are when interacting but also reveal the sentiments they attach to these images. By working on pragmatic changes in discourse, *Énonciation* can also help us to identify instability: shifts, contradictions, corrections, potential manipulation, etc.

A final issue concerns the possibility to identify multiple voices in what people say and what they construct: voices of others, their own past/future voices, etc. Gillespie and Cornish (2010), who also work from a dialogical perspective, suggest placing intersubjectivity at the center of analysis. As such they propose moving beyond individualistic research methodologies that ignore the fact that discourses (of othering) are co-constructed between people (*ibid.*: 3). This can allow examining the instability of othering processes in interaction and the complexify of their formation.

Beyond othering in research?

It is increasingly important for researchers themselves to be critical towards their own potential othering of the research participants they work with. This is often related to some of the intellectual simplifiers that we use in research (culture, gender, ethnicity, etc.) but also to methodologies. For example in the fields of intercultural communication and education the way participants are selected is often biased: either they are selected based on their nationality or on the neighborhood where they live, leading to different forms of “methodological nationalism”. Drawing general conclusions about a people if researchers have not looked into other populations can result in othering. A student wanted to work on the problems faced by immigrant learners of mathematics in Finland, claiming that they have specific issues because of their different culture. I asked him to consider “comparing” the sort of problems that Finnish students face when learning mathematics so as not to draw unfair othering conclusions on immigrant children.

Researchers should also be careful about categorizing people into groups. There are often differences within groups that need to be taken into account. For Gillespie, Howarth and Cornish (2012: 392), social categories should be considered as being perspectival, historical, disrupted by the movement of people and re-constitutive of the phenomena they seek to describe. Such categories are perspectival in the sense that no category is “natural” but is always based on someone’s vision (the researcher, the participants, decision-makers who fund research, etc.). It is thus important in our work to clarify this aspect in order to reduce the othering effect (*ibid.*: 393) but also contradictions. There is, for example, at the moment a trend to criticize so-called “methodological nationalism” (i.e. the Nation-State as the sole explanation for individual characteristics) as it often leads to unfair othering; yet, at the same time, dichotomies such as East-West, North-South, Men-Women are gaining ground (again) as ways of examining the world in research. In relation to the historicity of social categories, Gillespie et al. (2012: 394) criticize the fact that a lot of work on the other seems to be “stuck in the past”. This seems to be the case in relation to how China and the Chinese

are treated in research today. An over-emphasis on the philosopher Confucius' importance (551-479 B.C.) – whose ideas are being ideologized again in this context after decades of abandonment – to explain how and why the Chinese behave or think in such or such ways is problematic. This leads us to Gillespie et al.'s third point: social categories are disrupted by people's movements in and out of contexts, social classes, genders, places, etc. but also moods, illnesses (ibid.: 394). All of these impact on their status as others and should thus be taken into account to avoid, and that is Gillespie et al.'s last point, "an unreflective use" which can result in the "same risks as those evidenced in lay thinking" (ibid.: 395). Bearing in mind and being self-reflexive about the fact that research participants are agents involved in intersubjective phenomena (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires...) and who may also other us researchers, is thus essential. Othering is a "sin" universally shared and to which researchers should not contribute but analyse.

SEE ALSO:

→ cultural identity → Discourse Analysis → discourses of religion → identity construction
→ intercultural dialogue → intertextuality → migration discourse → power discourses → racist discourse → sexual identities in discourse

References and Suggested Readings

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1982). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Breidenbach, J., & Nyiri, P. (2009). *Seeing Culture Everywhere: From Genocide to Consumer Habits*. Seattle, W. A.: University of Washington Press.
- Chebel d'Appollonia, A. (2011). *Les Frontières du Racisme* (Frontiers of Racism). Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- Dervin, F., & Gao, M. (2012). Keeping up appearances before the 'Other'? Interculturality and Occidentalism in the educational TV-programme *Happy Chinese*. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 7(4), 553-575.
- Gillespie, A., & Cornish, F. (2010). Intersubjectivity: Towards a dialogical analysis. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 40, 19-46.
- Gillespie, A., Howarth, C., and Cornish, F. (2012). Four problems for researchers using social categories. *Culture and Psychology*, 18(3), 391-402.
- Grossen, M. (2010). Interaction analysis and psychology: a dialogical perspective. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Sciences*, 44(1), 1-22.
- Hart, A. (2013). *The Anti-racist Policy and the Regulation of School Life*. London: Manifesto Club.
- Johansson, M., & Suomela-Salmi, E. (2011). Enonciation: French pragmatic approach(es). In *Discursive Pragmatics* (pp. 71-98). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Krumer-Nevo, M., & Sidi, M. (2012). Writing against othering. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18, 299-309.

- Moscovici, S. (1961). *La Psychanalyse, Son Image et Son Public* (Psychoanalysis, its Image and its Public). Paris: P. U. F.
- Dhamoon, R. (2009). *Identity/Difference Politics: How Difference Is Produced, and Why it Matters*. Vancouver, Toronto, Canada: UBC Press.
- Piller, I. (2011). *Intercultural Communication*. Edinburgh: EUP.
- Roulet, E. (2011). Polyphony. In *Discursive Pragmatics* (pp. 208-222). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.