From Linguistic Molehills to Social Mountains? 
Introducing Moral Panics about Language

by

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Introducing Moral Panics about Language.

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We live in the age of the ‘moral panic’ - or so we are told. Barely a day passes by without the media confronting us with some new danger supposedly emanating from the ever-increasing moral laxity within our society. The term itself is generally attributed to Stanley Cohen’s 1972 *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, a study of media reactions to disturbances between groups of young people in British seaside resorts in the 1960s. Since then, the concept has been widely adopted by sociologists and cultural theorists to account for public and media responses to such diverse phenomena as street muggings in the 1970s, AIDS in the 1980s, and child abuse/pornography in the 1990s (see Jenkins, 1992). Indeed, so well-established is the concept that it is now commonplace to refer to ‘moral panic theory’ or ‘moral panic studies’, and in 1998 Kenneth Thompson’s volume *Moral Panics* was published by Routledge in its ‘Key Ideas Series’.

The use of the term in linguistics, however, is relatively recent. It was first introduced by Deborah Cameron in *Verbal Hygiene* (1995) as part of her discussion of the huge public and media debate surrounding the teaching of English grammar in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Superficially, the aim of what Cameron referred to as ‘the great grammar crusade’ appeared to be the resurrection of formal grammar teaching in English and Welsh schools in the context of the recently introduced National Curriculum. But apparent concerns with educational standards were only the tip of the iceberg. It was here that Cameron found the concept of the ‘moral panic’ invaluable when trying to unravel the complex relationship between the symbolic value of ‘grammar’ for many non-linguists, and the media’s involvement in raising public anxiety about an allegedly more general decline in moral standards within society.

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1 Many thanks to Greg Myers, Jannis Androutsopoulos, David Barton and Frank Finlay for their extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2 However, the first published reference was by Jock Young in a volume edited by Cohen (1971).
The aim of this paper is three-fold: firstly, to provide a definition of the ‘moral panic’ along with the processes which are thought to characterise it; secondly, to explore the usefulness of the concept for linguistic research generally; and thirdly, to outline some important methodological considerations for its application.

1. Introducing Moral Panics

1.1 Moral Panics, Folk Devils and the Construction of Deviance

Stanley Cohen begins his seminal work on moral panics with the following, widely quoted definition:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself.

(1972:9)

Kenneth Thompson summarises Cohen’s ideas in terms of the following key stages which moral panics generally undergo:

1. Something or someone is defined as a threat to values or interests.
2. This threat is depicted in an easily recognisable form by the media.
3. There is a rapid build-up of public concern.
4. There is a response from authorities or opinion-makers.
5. The panic recedes or results in social changes.

(1998: 8)
A further set of key factors in moral panics are identified by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1992:33-41) and outlined by Thompson as follows:

- a high level of *concern* over the behaviour of a certain group or category of people;
- an increased level of *hostility* toward the group or category regarded as a threat;
- *volatility* [insofar as] moral panics are likely to appear suddenly and be short-lived [...] The level of feverish concern characteristic of the moral panic phase is not likely to last, even if the problem itself is of long standing.
- *disproportionality* refers to an implicit assumption on the part of some who use the term ‘moral panic’ that the threat or danger is more substantial than is warranted by a realistic appraisal.

(1998: 9)

For Cohen, the study of moral panics was closely tied up with the ‘new’ criminology studies of the 1960s, which were particularly concerned with collective behaviour and social deviance. The aim of such work was to explore the processes by which a society comes to label certain individuals or groups as deviants or *folk devils*. Since deviance theory claims that no person or act is inherently deviant but merely so ‘in the eye of the beholder’, Philip Jenkins suggests that:

Studying a moral panic may well have intrinsic interest, but it also illuminates the values, fears, and conflicts of the community, which apparently needs to imagine such an external threat. Observing the construction of conspiracies and problems therefore provides a powerful tool for social analysis.

(1992:9)

1.2 Manufacturing the Panic: the Role of the Mass Media

The ‘folk devils’ described in Cohen’s study were a disparate group of youths, who came together in the British seaside resort of Clacton on Easter Sunday 1964. Cohen sets the scene as follows:
Easter was worse than usual. It was cold and wet, and in fact Easter Sunday was the coldest for eighty years. The shop-keepers and stall owners were irritated by the lack of business and the young people had their own boredom and irritation fanned by rumours of café owners and barmen refusing to serve some of them. A few groups started scuffling on the pavements and throwing stones at each other. The Mods and Rockers factions - a division initially based on clothing and life styles, later rigidified, but at that time not fully established - started separating out. Those on bikes and scooters roared up and down, windows were broken, some beach huts were wrecked and one boy fired a starting pistol in the air. The vast number of people crowding into the streets, the noise, everyone’s general irritation and the actions of an unprepared and undermanned police force had the effect of making the two days unpleasant, oppressive and sometimes frightening.

(1972:29)

Of particular interest to Cohen was the reaction of the mass media to this incident, both in the immediate aftermath and the year or so that followed. Based on a detailed analysis of press coverage, Cohen highlighted three features which typified the reporting. First, there was consistent exaggeration and distortion of the original events, especially the purported levels of violence and damage (ibid:31-8). Such accounts were underpinned not least by the use of melodramatic vocabulary redolent of war-reporting, with scenes regularly described as riots, battles, sieges, orgies of destruction etc. A second feature was the prediction that similar incidents were inevitable and that the situation as a whole was set to worsen (ibid:38-40). Such forewarnings then provided a means of constructing further stories in the absence of actual events. So, for example, even subsequent non-violent encounters between youths were often reported, thereby securing continuation of coverage. Third, Cohen described the manner in which the media narrative underwent a process of symbolisation (ibid:40-4). Thus "a word (Mod) becomes symbolic of a certain status (delinquent or deviant); objects (hairstyle, clothing) symbolise the word; the objects themselves become symbolic of the status (and the emotions attached to the status)" (ibid:40). It was in this way that words (Mods and Rockers) and objects (scooters and parkas) quickly became "symbols and labels" with "their own descriptive and explanatory potential" (ibid:41), all of which served to produce images which were ultimately "much sharper than reality" (ibid:43).

This process of symbolisation was later elaborated upon by Stuart Hall et al (1978) in Policing the Crisis, their now classic study of the moral panic about street muggings in 1970s’ Britain. Hall and his colleagues described the signification spiral which ensues
when news-reports amplify the potential threat posed by those individuals or practices constructed as deviant. Two key features in this regard are ‘convergence’ and ‘thresholds’. Convergence takes place when two or more events or activities are brought together in ways which impute parallels between them. For example, the coinage "student hooliganism" collapses student protest, on the one hand, with mindless vandalism, on the other, thereby depoliticising the original protest (ibid:223-5). Thresholds refer to those limits of behaviour thought to be acceptable within a given society, for example, with regard to violence or sexuality. Through such signification spirals the impression is often created that thresholds are about to be - or already have been - transgressed (ibid:225-7). It is at this juncture that calls for a tighter policing of moral boundaries and/or harsher legislation are typically heard.

In the later stages of a signification spiral, Hall et al note how it is not uncommon to find: "a ‘mapping together’ of moral panics into a general panic about social order" (ibid: 222 - authors’ own italics). In some cases, this is related to the way in which panics may be couched in terms of what Jenkins describes as symbolic politics (1992:10). Thus: "Claim-makers often drew attention to a specific problem in part because it symbolised another issue, which for one reason or another could not be attacked directly: what might be described as the "politics of substitution" (ibid - my italics). He then cites the example of public attitudes in Britain towards homosexuality from the 1970s onwards when, following the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults in 1967, it became difficult for moral opponents to express their hostility as openly as before.

1.3 Why the Panic?

Why do moral panics occur? This is probably the most difficult question of all, and social and cultural theorists propose a variety of contributory factors, if not, explanations.

Most panics, it seems, would not be complete without key players known as moral entrepreneurs. These are individuals who tend to latch on to pre-existing panics, frequently turning them into something of a personal crusade in the belief that ‘something should be done’ about the problem at hand. Although there is generally no reason to doubt the sincerity and commitment which such entrepreneurs generally bring to their cause (indeed it would be unwise to do so), Jenkins does point out how:
[...] very few political or moralist campaigners are interested in only one cause or topic. There is a natural tendency for activists who have been successful in exploiting one fruitful issue to employ similar rhetoric and examples in related causes. Also, they bring to the new campaigns the enhanced prestige and public visibility acquired through earlier movements.

(1992:12-3)

Not uncommonly, the activities of moral entrepreneurs are coupled with the formation of action groups. Cohen, for example, describes the concerns of one campaigner, the owner of a small hotel near the Clacton sea-front. His widely-publicised campaign of letter-writing and lobbying of local MPs eventually led to the formation of an action group ‘Beachside’ Safeguard Committee along with demands for tighter policing to rid the area of the ‘scourge of the Mods and Rockers’ (1972:124-6).

The ways in which isolated individuals and groups orchestrate moral campaigns, and their symbiotic relationship with the media, form a significant component of any moral panic study. In isolation, however, they fail to offer an adequate explanation of why such panics occur in the first place. Part of the problem with such an approach is its tendency to overlook Cohen’s crucial claim that moral panics share many of the features more generally characteristic of collective behaviour. Such behaviour can be observed, for example, in episodes of mass hysteria or delusion, and the conduct of crowds in say riots or disasters (1972:11-2). According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda:

Collective behavior is defined as behavior that is relatively spontaneous, volatile, evanescent, emergent, extra-institutional, and short-lived; it emerges or operates in situations in which there are no, or few adequate, clear-cut definitions as to what to do from mainstream culture. Collective behavior operates outside the stable, patterned structures of society; it reflects the "maverick" side of human nature. Compared with conventional, everyday life, collective behavior is less inhibited and more spontaneous, more changeable and less structured, shorter-lived and less stable.

(1992:104)

The key implication here is that panics are most likely to occur in situations where moral guidelines from mainstream culture are somehow felt to be lacking. Thus taking a broader view, such panics can be seen as especially symptomatic of attempts to redraw moral boundaries during periods where societies are undergoing stress, change, and/or crises of identity. This is the essence of Cohen’s politics of anxiety theory whereby a new, external threat is ‘needed’ by society, perhaps as a scapegoat for more
generalised concerns at a given time - an idea closely related to Jenkins’ ‘politics of substitution’ discussed earlier. In Cohen’s interpretation, for example, the Mods and Rockers phenomenon was ultimately a vicarious expression of the widespread uncertainty felt by a generation who had lived through World War 2 and who, despite in the words of Prime Minister Macmillan ‘never having had it so good’, were uncomfortable with (and possibly envious of) the relative affluence and sexual freedom enjoyed by the younger people they saw around them (1972:192).

Particularly vulnerable in periods of extensive change are those who hold traditional positions of social, economic, and/or cultural power. Such groups will often experience change as a potential threat to their hegemony. Alternatively, according to Jenkins, they might grasp the opportunity: "to expand their influence and resources by focusing public attention on perceived problems that fall within their scope of activity." (1992:6) This approach to moral panics, known as interest group theory, is closely associated with the American theorists Goode and Ben-Yehuda, who differentiate between three main models (1992:124-43). The grassroots model suggests that panics originate ‘bottom-up’, that is, with the public, who identify (rightly or wrongly) a potential threat - the classic example being the fear of witchcraft leading to the Salem witch trials in the seventeenth century. This contrasts with a ‘top-down’, élite-engineered model which can be further divided into a class model, whereby a group seeks to secure the reproduction of existing socio-economic relations, or an élite model where concerns are more with the replication of social status and privilege (though the two may of course be interrelated).

As Thompson (1998:19) points out, interest group-based theories are extremely useful when analysing the methods and motives of those individuals and groups involved in moral panics. However, they have two main weaknesses. First they can only really account for isolated episodes of panic, whilst remaining unable to explain the rapidity of successive panics in a given period and/or their potential interdependence. Second, the media is largely viewed as just another interest group, such that the important contribution of Hall et al’s work on signification processes tends to be undermined. It is precisely here, however, that Thompson sees a genuine opportunity to explore the all-important links between individual campaigners, interest groups, the media, and the broader social contexts in which panics are likely to occur. This is not least because: "A signification spiral does not exist in a vacuum. It can only work if the connecting links are easily established by drawing on pre-existing ideological complexes or discursive formations." (ibid:20)
1.4 The Discourse of Moral Panics

The work of Hall et al on street muggings in the 1970s has often been questioned, particularly by those critical of - or uncomfortable with - its explicitly Marxist perspective and/or its alleged playing-down of the very real increases in the incidence of crime during the period it analysed (see Waddington, 1986). However, the particular value of *Policing the Crisis* lies, according to Thompson (1998:56), in the imaginative way in which it decodes media narratives, allowing us to explore the relationship between the gathering, processing, and presentation of news in ways which are intrinsically escalating, and inclined to imply a more general threat to the social order.

Hall et al begin their analysis of the ‘social production of news’ by pointing out how: "The media do not simply and transparently report events which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy in themselves. ‘News’ is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories." (ibid:53 - authors’ own italics). It is in this initial sorting that the structuring process begins, as journalists seek out stories which are "out of the ordinary" or in some way "breach our ‘normal’ expectations". It is this extraordinariness - or deviance - which frequently constitutes the primary news value (ibid).

The presentation of news stories also involves rendering them in such a way that is intelligible to the assumed target audience. Thus:

> If the world is not to be represented as a jumble of random and chaotic events, then they must be identified (i.e. named, defined, related to other events known to the audience), and assigned to a social context (i.e. placed within a frame of meanings familiar to the audience). Things are newsworthy because they represent the changefulness, the unpredictability and the conflictual nature of the world. But such events cannot be allowed to remain the limbo of the ‘random’ - they must be brought within the horizon of the ‘meaningful,’ i.e. related to existing knowledge and cultural maps. (ibid:54-5)

One such ‘cultural map’, they argue, is the assumed consensual basis of society, i.e. the belief that, within society, common interests, values, and perspectives outweigh potential differences. On one level, this is rooted in a community’s use of a shared language (or languages) with which to make sense of the world. On another level, it is grounded in the more fundamental ideological conviction that societies are structured
by tradition, order, and hierarchy, which may over time be subject to moderate change but never radical innovation - all factors which inevitably secure the perpetuation of the prevailing socio-economic system (ibid:55-6). Because the media are interested in presenting news which breach ordinary, everyday expectations, Hall et al suggest that those items are seen as particularly newsworthy which do not conform to such images of consensus, order, and routine (ibid:57). It is here that the journalists’ ‘hunch’ about the value of a good news story comes into play - if the item itself is of only moderate primary interest, it may be useful (or even necessary) to infer deeper, secondary meanings by implying that there is ‘more to this than meets the eye’. It is at this stage that signification spirals are particularly evident, with the kind of mapping together of moral panics into more general concerns about social order referred to earlier.

However, Hall et al are keen to emphasise that the media are not party to any kind of general conspiracy against the wider population. Instead their work shows how the very conditions within which news-gathering takes place are structurally inclined to reproduce the interests and definitions of those in positions of power (ibid). For example, journalists do not as a rule manufacture new stories, but the time constraints within which they work lead them nonetheless, in the search for a regular supply of news, to institutional sources and pre-scheduled events (ibid). This is also tied in with the perceived demand for objectivity, which steers journalists towards institutional representatives, who are considered authorities on given subjects. It is in this way that the media reproduce the ideologies of the powerful due to an over-accessing of such authoritative sources, who in turn become the primary definers of news (ibid:58). Such primary definers therefore play a crucial role in agenda-setting since their particular interpretations of events provide the discursive frame within which all subsequent contributions must be made. They also have the power to define what comes to be seen as the ‘common sense view’ of a topic. Once established, it can be very difficult to realign such primary frames of reference, and anyone who attempts to do so generally faces accusations of irrelevance or even prevarication (ibid:59). Hall et al show, for example, how discourses of race in 1970s Britain were presented primarily in terms of the ‘number of blacks’ in the country. So powerful was this quantitative discursive frame that even those who did not consider numbers to be the source of ‘the problem’ were nevertheless obliged to present their responses in ways which downplayed that interpretation, e.g. by claiming that the figures had been exaggerated (ibid).

Finally, all news production undergoes what Hall et al refer to as a process of transformation (ibid:60). This may involve journalists presenting news items in the language of their assumed target audience, and also providing interpretations which will fit the cultural maps of that audience (ibid). Thus when in 1973 a Chief Inspector
claimed in his annual report that ‘the increase in violent crimes in England and Wales had aroused justifiable public concern’, this was translated by the British tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, into the headline ‘AGGRO BRITAIN: "Mindless Violence" of the Bully Boys Worries Top Policeman’ (ibid:61). Such transformations into everyday language of the viewpoints of primary definers in turn help to naturalise and objectify those views as valid issues of public concern (ibid:62). They also discretely reinsert the consensual agenda insofar as the media “inflect” the language of the public "with dominant and consensual connotations" (ibid). In other words, if the police are worried about violent crime, then there must be a genuine problem, not least since, by implication, all crime is a threat to the existing social order.

In its most extreme form this popular idiom is also used when the media speaks with the *voice of the people*, claiming to represent their views, and sometimes even setting specific agendas for public campaigns (ibid:63). As Thompson notes:

> These press representations of public opinion are often then enlisted by those in power as ‘impartial evidence’ of what the public wants. At this point the ‘spiral of amplification’ is particularly tight. It is not so much that there is a perfect ideological closure in thinking about the subject, but rather that alternative viewpoints are difficult to insert on terms other than those set by the dominant framework.

(1998:61)

This, as we shall see in the next section, is precisely where the concept of moral panic studies becomes relevant to linguistics, that is, when the primary definers of public debates on language are not professional linguists, and the frames of reference for discussing language have not necessarily been of linguists’ choosing.

2. **From Moral Panics to Moral Panics about Language**

2.1 **The Great Grammar Crusade**

In her book *Verbal Hygiene* (Routledge, 1995), Deborah Cameron describes how the late 1980s and early 1990s saw an extraordinary upsurge in the level of media interest in the question of English grammar and how it should be taught. This ‘great grammar
crusade’, as she referred to it, provided a fascinating case of public, political, and media concern about language, bearing many of the classic hallmarks of a moral panic.

Before looking at the kinds of statements which were made about language in the course of this dispute, it is essential to say something about the immediate socio-political context in which it took place. In 1987 the British Conservative party, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, was re-elected to a third term of office with a strong mandate for their proposed reform of education in England and Wales. This began with the 1988 Education Act and the setting-up of a National Curriculum with three main aims: a) the introduction of a mandatory syllabus for all primary and secondary schools, stipulating precisely which subjects were to be studied by pupils at which age; b) the specification of the content and pedagogic aims of those designated subject areas; c) the setting of required levels of attainment in each subject to be monitored by compulsory testing at Key Stages, i.e. ages 7, 11, 14 and 16. Viewed in its wider context, the National Curriculum implied a significant shift in the balance of educational control away from Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in favour of central government. In the course of the next few years, as educationalists and politicians struggled to sketch out the content of that Curriculum, the teaching of English - and particularly English grammar - evolved into a crucial area of dispute.

In 1987 the Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, appointed Sir John Kingman to enquire into the teaching of English language. Baker was clearly looking for a change in existing approaches, which, in his opinion, placed too little emphasis on the kind of formal grammar teaching essential if pupils were to learn how to use language correctly. But the Kingman report of 1988 and the subsequent Cox report of 1989 both failed to deliver the turnaround in the contents and methods of English teaching to which Baker aspired. Two main areas of controversy emerged between an alliance referred to by Cameron as the ‘pro-grammar conservatives’, on the one hand, and educationalists/linguists, on the other (ibid:86-7).

The first concerned the fundamental issue of whether formal grammar should be taught at all. The pro-grammar conservatives lamented both the demise in such teaching and, in particular, the methods associated with it, namely rote-learning and whole-class teaching. Whilst these had undoubtedly seen a decline in popularity, this was the result of a body of educational research which had consistently questioned both the...
effectiveness of such methods *per se*, as well as the cognitive link between formal grammar teaching, on the one hand, and pupils’ ability to *use* language effectively, on the other. For the pro-grammar conservatives, however, such developments merely reflected the progressive ideology of a generation of teachers ‘brainwashed’ by liberal educationalists. The second area of dispute related to the actual model of grammar to be adopted - prescriptive or descriptive. For the pro-grammar conservatives the prescription that *standard* English be taught was the only way of eradicating what they saw as sloppy, incorrect, non-standard usage. Professional linguists and educationalists, on the other hand, whilst not dismissing outright the value of pupils’ learning the standard language, tended to favour a more descriptive approach which would simultaneously foster a greater respect for non-standard varieties (ibid:89).

The ensuing battle was fought out in many government working groups, and excited much media interest, the details of which are summarised in Cameron (1995:85-93). But to cut a long and complex story short, when in 1994 the Cox committee presented its findings, it emerged that the report contained more explicit references to standard English than had been formally recommended, and all references to bilingualism and dialect diversity in the classroom had been deleted (ibid:91). The Secretary of State had himself intervened in the report, demanding that it contain the unambiguous instruction that all pupils be taught standard English (ibid:92). Despite protestations from professional linguists that the standard language was more an artefact rooted in prejudice than a tangible focus for classroom study, the pro-grammar conservatives had won. The ‘expert opinions’ of linguists had simply failed to resonate, and the discourse surrounding the dispute had evolved into something which Cameron proposes bore "more than a passing resemblance to the sort of periodic hysteria cultural historians have labelled ‘moral panic’" (ibid:82).

### 2.2 The Metaphorics of Grammar

Grammar, as Cameron herself points out, may seem an unlikely candidate for a moral panic, given that episodes are usually centred around much racier themes such as sex, drugs, and crime (ibid:85). But the key to understanding the unusually high level of public and media concern which surrounded this topic lies in unravelling the complex way in which grammar became caught up in a broader moral agenda.

Most moral panics begin with the discovery of ‘a problem’ - which may or may not be new. The idea of people lamenting the state of the English language was certainly not novel. Nor was it uncommon for conservatives to blame progressive, liberal teachers
for the perceived decline in public morality, which in conservatives’ view was a logical outcome of the ‘permissive ethos’ of the 1960s. As Cameron notes, however, what was new about the great grammar crusade was the innovative way in which these two phenomena were combined (ibid:85-6). This began as early as 1982 with a letter to the Observer newspaper in which, John Rae, a headmaster at a prestigious private school, proposed that the demise of grammar teaching had actually caused the decline in moral standards. He claimed, for example, that:

The overthrow of grammar coincided with the acceptance of the equivalent of creative writing in social behaviour. As nice points of grammar were mockingly dismissed as pedantic and irrelevant, so was punctiliousness in such matters as honesty, responsibility, property, gratitude, apology and so on.

(John Rae, Observer, 7 February 1982)

This relationship of causality was echoed in many of the statements on grammar teaching which emerged over the next few years and were reported in the media:

If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy at school... all these things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards, then there’s no imperative to stay out of crime.

(Normal Tebbit, MP, Radio 4, 1985)

All the letters sent from my office I have to correct myself, and that is because English is taught so bloody badly. ... We must educate for character. That’s the trouble with schools. They don’t educate for character. This matters a great deal. The whole way schools are operating is not right. I do not believe English is being taught properly. You cannot educate people properly unless you do it on a basic framework and drilling system.

(Prince Charles, 1989)

I would always be wary of anything [i.e. any way of teaching English] that took away from discipline. Children should be taught in a very formal way, otherwise the sloppiness goes on throughout their lives.

(Jeffrey Archer, quoted in Independent on Sunday, 13 March 1994)

(All quotes from Cameron, 1995:94)
But just how is it possible, within the same utterance, to link the alleged demise of standard English to poor levels of personal hygiene and eventually criminality? Why is teaching English ‘properly’ thought to produce pupils with better characters? For Cameron, this ultimately relates to the way in which grammar serves as a moral metaphor in society. This is because, in the minds of very many people, grammar readily equates with a range of basic social values such as "order, tradition, authority, hierarchy and rules" (ibid:95 - author’s own emphasis). These, in turn, are the values underpinning a consensual image of society, and contrast sharply with those of a conflict-oriented view, namely "disorder, change, fragmentation, anarchy and lawlessness" (ibid). Seen in this light, it is somewhat easier to appreciate how a concern for grammar metamorphoses into fears concerning fundamental principles of social organisation. Bad grammar becomes a metaphor for bad behaviour; disrespect for (correct) grammar symbolises a disrespect for other people; and a lack of respect for others is, as we all know, the root of crime and eventually anarchy (ibid:95-6).

In order to understand how linguists, along with many educationalists and teachers, can be cast as the ‘folk devils’ in such a panic, it is essential to appreciate how their own views of language can easily be linked to this dystopian vision. Of course, in one important sense, linguists’ approach to the structure of language is not inherently anarchic. Indeed, as Cameron points out, most linguists work with a view of language as "ordered, hierarchical and rule-governed" (ibid:97). Where they frequently differ from the pro-grammar conservatives, however, is that they identify order, hierarchy and rules not only in standard languages, but where others see only chaos, i.e. in non-standard varieties (ibid). Similarly linguists do not accept the inherent immutability of standard languages. As most sociolinguistic research has shown, notions of standard vary not only over time but also over space, hence the term ‘standard Englishes’.

But it is precisely this kind of linguistic relativism to which many non-linguists object. This is because linguists’ apparent unwillingness to show absolute deference towards standard English (in the singular) can easily be resignified as a more general disrespect for the traditional social values it is thought to embody. It is in this regard that linguists are especially vulnerable to accusations not only of linguistic but also moral relativism - itself a crucial step on the metaphorical path to social decline (ibid). For those who genuinely believe in such a link (and moral panics studies suggest that it is unwise to doubt their commitment to such beliefs), one important means of countering that decline lies in the teaching of formal grammar, which instils those all-important extra-linguistic values such as respect for rules, tradition, order, discipline, and authority. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on the rules of language, one has no time to explore
their basis. Indeed, as Rosina Lippi-Green convincingly demonstrates in *English with an Accent* (Routledge, 1997), to question the logic underpinning such rules would be to challenge the fundamental prejudices and iniquities upon which our society is built.

Such metaphorics extend not only to the *content* of language teaching, i.e. prescriptive versus descriptive models of grammar, but also the *form*. Thus the methods normally associated with formal grammar teaching - rote-learning, drills, memory tests - meld equally well with underlying concerns about rules, tradition, order, discipline, and authority. This is reflected, for example, in the layout of classrooms (desks in rows, teacher-centred learning), the classification of pupils’ according to ability within schools (streaming), and ultimately the organisation of the whole education system (selecting the best pupils to attend the appropriately-named grammar schools). Together the opposites of these: apparently unstructured classroom layout, pupil-centred learning, group and/or project work, mixed-ability teaching, and comprehensive education come to symbolise what Cameron terms the ultimate "classroom dystopia" (ibid:108). In late, 1980s post-Falklands Britain, this was a vision which soon became caught up in broader ‘state of the nation’ discourses, where many concerns about English/British heritage, culture, and identity were anxiously articulated within the National Curriculum debate (ibid).

### 2.3 The Politics of Language Panics

According to Cameron:

> The great grammar crusade illustrates a paradox to which this book [*Verbal Hygiene*] repeatedly draws attention. It is a classic case where a bad argument, put forward by people who know little or nothing about language, nevertheless succeeds, because although much of its substance is nonsensical it engages with the underlying assumptions of its audience and therefore makes a kind of sense; whereas the opposing argument put forward by experts fails, because it is at odds with the audience’s underlying assumptions and is therefore apprehended as nonsensical.

(1995: 81)

This is a potentially depressing view for linguistics in general and linguists in particular. But Cameron’s purpose in describing this dispute is to provoke linguists into thinking long and hard not only about the nature of the claims they make about language but also *how* they make them.
For Cameron, probably the greatest shortcoming in the conduct of linguists throughout the grammar panic was their failure to engage effectively with the moral symbolism of the debate. What the government wanted from the Kingman and Cox reports was a clear set of guidelines on ways to improve standards of English teaching and usage. Of course, the pro-grammar conservatives already had their own fixed ideas about how this was to be achieved: all pupils should be taught grammar formally and made to learn standard English (ibid:102). For many linguists, such a proposal was both illogical and academically suspect. However, the mistake they made, in Cameron’s view, was to focus on the linguistic dimensions of the debate such as the lack of a proven link between formal grammar teaching and communicative competence, or the relativism of the term ‘standard English’.

Cameron proposes that much of the misunderstanding between linguists and lay-language users is centred on the tension between descriptivism and prescriptivism. This is a complex debate which cannot be pursued fully here (see Cameron, 1985:3-11 & 98-104; Lippi-Green, 1997:8-9) although the main issue is relatively straightforward. Most professional linguists align themselves a priori with a descriptivist view of language. However, whilst they generally argue in favour of greater tolerance towards, say ‘non-standard varieties of language’, they tend to show somewhat less understanding towards the views of those people for whom language is metaphorically tied up with prescriptivist notions of tradition, order, and hierarchy. As the great grammar crusade implies, it is precisely here that moral panics about language are likely to be generated - when the views of linguists and non-linguists collide head on, as they so frequently do whenever language is discussed in the public domain. For Cameron, the conclusion is clear: linguists must not only take far more seriously the right of other people to hold ideas about language which may digress from their own. They must also accept the need to engage in public debates on language within frames of reference which are not necessarily of their choosing.

What the basic framework of moral panic theory allows us to explore are the means by which such frames of reference are generated, reproduced, and potentially escalated. In the case of the great grammar crusade, this cannot be extracted from the broader political and cultural anxieties prevalent in Britain at the time, whereby linguistic homogeneity, as embodied in the standard language, came to stand as an important symbol of cultural and national unity. The dispute over grammar also took place within a wider attempt to bring about a shift in the control of education from local levels (individual schools, teachers and LEAs) into the hands of central government. Although it rings of a conspiracy theory, generating hostility against teachers and
education academics is of course a useful strategy for gaining wider, public consent for such political intervention. But a conspiracy it was to some degree: as Cameron shows, the initial mapping together of linguistic and moral discourses in John Rae’s letter to the *Observer* was later revealed to be the work of right-wing policy groups and think-tanks (ibid:86) - a strategy which bears more than a passing resemblance to Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s concept of an élite-engineered panic discussed earlier.

Skilfully exploited by those groups was the fact that, although the primary news value of ‘grammar’ is undoubtedly fairly minimal, its underlying symbolism lends itself well to a more general metaphorics of social order. The signification spiral which then ensued through Rae’s letter and subsequent media interventions soon amplified the significance of grammar, investing it with the secondary news value essential for those rather bland items lacking that ‘certain something out of the ordinary’. In this way the discursive frame had been firmly established by primary signifiers who were not themselves linguists, and it soon became very difficult for anyone else (including and especially linguists) to insert their views on alternative terms. Indeed any attempt to do so, drawing on what they perceived to be the ‘linguistic facts’ merely confirmed in the eyes of the public the fundamental lack of commitment on the part of linguists to improving standards of education generally. Hence the following attack on the Cox Committee’s proposals in the *Today* newspaper:

> How is a secondary school child supposed to learn anything about how to speak or write in the glorious English language when the advisers cannot lay down any serious rules to guide them? ... So nervous have Mr Baker’s advisers become at being charged with elitism or discrimination by one group or another that they have lost the guts to recommend anything useful at all. ... Mr Baker must base his curriculum on the recognition that some kinds of English really are more worthwhile than others.

(Cited in Cameron, 1995:101)

And, as we saw earlier, a useful tool in the manufacturing of consent is to ‘tell it to the people’ in their own language. This is what the *Daily Star* had to say in a feature entitled: ‘Cor Blimey, would you Adam and Eve it?’:

> It aint ‘arf OK for kids not to talk proper. That’s the verdict of a shock new report on how Britain’s children should be taught. The controversial blue-print by the National Curriculum Council says schools should introduce a new ‘three Rs’ - reading, ‘riting and relaxing the Queen’s English.

(ibid)
For Cameron, the way out of this apparent impasse is not to dismiss such views from the start, but to begin by at least accepting people’s fundamental right to hold them. She then proposes that linguists accept that the terms of reference may not be of their own choosing, but that they can still develop strategies in order to engage with the arguments:

The way to intervene in public debates like the one about English grammar is not to deny the importance of standards and values but to focus critically on the particular standards and values being invoked and to propose alternatives - just as the way to change unjust laws is not to abolish all laws but to make more enlightened ones. There is nothing wrong in wanting to set standards of excellence in the use of language. Rather what is wrong is the narrow definition of excellence.

(1995:115)

It is a highly pragmatic response, but one which need not be purely reactive. Indeed, what Cameron is saying is that linguists too must be proactive in the resignification of the term ‘standards’: the "discourse of standards", she suggests, is available to both sides (ibid). In the context of language, this might include, for example, shifting the focus away from say a pupil’s acquisition of ‘standard English’ and exploring alternative benchmarks of excellence in language usage such as clarity, structure of argument, and general communicative effectiveness.

3. From Objective Molehills to Subjective Mountains?
Methodological Issues in Moral Panic Studies

The aim of this paper is to suggest that moral panic theory has much to offer a socially oriented linguistics, particularly as a framework for exploring discussions about language in the public domain. However, the concept has not gone unchallenged in sociological and cultural studies. Thus there are a number of methodological disputes which, I believe, are well worth taking into consideration if future work on moral panics about language is to reap genuine theoretical insights.
3.1 The Problem of Disproportionality

Moral panics, as we have seen, revolve around some kind of threat - or perception thereof - to a pre-existing order. According to Thompson:

Implicit in the use of the two words ‘moral panic’ is the suggestion that the threat is to something held sacred by or fundamental to the society. The reason for calling it a moral panic is precisely to indicate that the perceived threat is not to something mundane - such as economic output or educational standards - but a threat to the social order itself or an idealised (‘ideological’) conception of some part of it.

(1998: 8)

It is not difficult to pick up on the sense of ‘threat’ felt by the British journalist Melanie Phillips whenever she writes about language matters, as she frequently does. A not untypical article in the Observer newspaper of 10 May 1998 was entitled:

Question: Why is teaching grammar still taboo?
Answer: Because teachers don’t understand it

Her feature - which would not have been out of place at the height of Cameron’s great grammar crusade - goes on to lament as a direct result of the alleged demise in the formal teaching of grammar:

[...] school-leavers unable to write a job application, and modern-language graduates leaving university speaking only pidgin French or German.

The use of "taboo" in the title already suggests an insidious ‘threat’ which continues to permeate the rest of the piece (see Appendix). A new report on grammar teaching provides, according to Phillips, "significant and alarming revelations". Whereas educational research had previously maintained that "formal grammar teaching was at best ineffective or at worst positively harmful", new findings show how the original research was "flawed" and its results "misinterpreted". That work has now been "torn to shreds" by a professor who has performed "a devastating demolition job on the prejudices and sloppiness of so many education academics". Amidst further accusations of academic malpractice, the tirade continues, and it does not take an especially close textual analysis to reveal the hyperbolic nature of the narrative in both the linguistic and moral sense.
However, the type of brief analysis to which I have subjected Phillips’ article already raises methodological issues central to the study of moral panics. I am, of course, myself passing moral judgement on Phillips’ views by suggesting that she is engaging in moral panicking, something which is inevitable amongst researchers who write about instances of what they would deem to be ‘moral panics’. Whilst the claim to absolute researcher objectivity is in itself a well-known ideological construct, both the terms moral and panic can easily imply a pre-disposition by the analyst to dismiss the debates in question as a) the product of inherent irrationality on the part of others; and/or b) the latter’s own manipulation by some greater social, political, or economic force. It is for this reason that some critics have dismissed the concept as “ideological” in its mainstream sense of overtly and/or overly politicised, and therefore methodologically biased (see Goode and Ben-Yehuda for discussion, 1994:50-1).

Moral panics begin with a sense of a threat. However, the essence of moral panic studies lies in theorists’ claims that the scale of the response to that threat is somehow disproportionate to the actual problem. Therein lies the irrationality of the panic - referred to by one theorist in terms of turning "objective molehills" into "subjective mountains" (Jones et al, 1989:4 cited in Goode/Ben-Yehuda, 1994:36). But at precisely what stage can the response to a perceived threat be realistically said to have superseded the threat itself? And how exactly does one measure the cleft between the two?

There has been much discussion of the alleged paucity of objective measures with which to resolve this particular methodological dilemma (see Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1992:31-65 for a summary). Waddington was one of the first to make this point, arguing that the moral panic was therefore destined to remain at the level of a "polemical rather than an analytical concept" (1986:258). But Goode and Ben-Yehuda went on to develop a set of such measures, proposing that "the criterion of disproportionality may be said to have been met" in the following circumstances:

1. **Figures exaggerated.** If the figures that are cited to measure the scope of the problem are grossly exaggerated;
2. **Figures fabricated.** If the concrete threat that is feared is, by all available evidence, non-existent;

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4 I am not, of course, suggesting that this one article constitutes a moral panic in itself though it might be seen as a further instance of the type of panic about grammar described by Cameron.
5 Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994:50-51) show how the concept has undoubtedly been adopted by theorists primarily on the left of the political spectrum, but argue forcefully that the methods of moral panic studies are by no means inherently closed to theorists of other political persuasions.
3. *Other harmful conditions.* If the attention paid to a specific condition is vastly greater than that paid to another, and the concrete threat or damage caused by the first is no greater than, or is less than, the second;

4. *Changes over time.* If the attention paid to a given condition at one point in time is vastly greater than that paid to it during a previous or later time without any corresponding increase in objective seriousness.

(1994:44-5)

But even allowing for these undoubtedly useful benchmarks, the issue of quantifying disproportionality still remains problematic. As Goode and Ben-Yehuda themselves concede, some types of threat are simply beyond calculation such as future-oriented fears surrounding, say, the greenhouse effect (ibid:43). More interestingly perhaps, Jenkins notes how some threats are not within the realms of what contemporary scholars are able (or willing) to investigate (1992:3). He cites seventeenth centuries fears of witchcraft - a more up-to-date example might be the genuine anxiety felt by many US citizens regarding potential alien abduction. Yet none of this means that people’s concerns relating to future-oriented or seemingly unquantifiable threats are any less worthy of serious attention. As Cohen noted in his original Mods and Rockers study, it would appear that ultimately: "It is the perception of threat and not its actual existence that is important" (1972:22 - my italics).

### 3.2 Objectivist and Constructionist Approaches to Moral Panics

In the light of such deliberations, two main approaches to the study of moral panics have emerged over the years: objectivist and constructionist (Thompson, 1998: 12).

The *objectivist* view of the moral panic accepts *a priori* that there is an area of concern and aims to quantify its seriousness. To return to the example of Phillips’ assertion that "modern-language graduates [are] leaving university speaking only pidgin French or German", the researcher working within this paradigm would accept the fundamental proposition that there is a problem with the linguistic competence of these students. She would then try to assess the level of that problem, explore the causes, and recommend potential forms of pedagogic redress, which might, some time later, be translated into actual educational policy.

By contrast, the *constructivist* is much more interested in exploring how and why an issue came to be perceived as a problem in the first place. Here two further distinctions can be made (ibid). The *strict constructivist* would analyse "the interests that particular
groups have in promoting a problem, the *resources* available to them, and the *ownership* that they eventually secure over the issue, or the degree to which their analysis is accepted as authoritative." (Jenkins, 1992:3 - author’s own italics). The *contextual constructivist*, on the other hand, takes on board certain elements of the objectivist view insofar as she aims to say something about the extent of the perceived problem but, like the strict constructivist, is ultimately more interested in exploring the discursive construction of the panic. To go back to the example of Phillips’ incompetent modern linguists, the strict constructivist would be primarily concerned with the arguments of those who participate in the criticism of such students and their tutors. In short, the object of study would be Phillips and her supporters, those branches of the media who grant them the time and space in which to air their views, and the texts via which those views are mediated. However, an assessment of the actual linguistic abilities of the students in question would only feature in a contextual constructivist account.

Cameron’s study of the great grammar crusade falls into the strict constructivist paradigm. Cameron is clearly less concerned with establishing factually the extent to which there had been a decline in grammatical (and by implication moral) standards, and is more interested in the discursive construction of the panic along with the depressing failure of linguists to be heard when it came to the formation of educational policy on the subject. But Cameron’s approach is more than simply a question of her own methodological preference. This is because it would have been futile trying to demonstrate quantitatively whether or not there had been a genuine decline in grammatical correctness. As all professional linguists know, language varies across space and changes over time, along with perceptions of what constitutes appropriate usage in a given context. This compares to many non-linguists, who often measure grammatical correctness in relation to the seemingly immutable norm of a standard language. Hence the methodological dilemma. From a linguist’s point of view, the notion of a ‘decline’ in grammatical standards cannot be addressed in terms of its disproportionality since most linguists do not share the fundamental premise that language undergoes structural decline *per se*. This nonetheless compares to the popularly held belief that such decline is genuinely feasible and that it might, in some cases, even be linked to a broader demise in moral standards.

We see therefore that some types of moral panics about language might well have as their basis problems which cannot be assessed quantitatively. This would similarly apply to future-oriented concerns such as fears of potential linguistic fragmentation. Though not presented in terms of a *moral panic* about language, Lippi-Green’s work on public debates surrounding African American Vernacular English (AAVE) shows
how a key fear was that of total communicative breakdown. It was in this context that the superintendent of public instruction of California predicted in 1966: "Correct English just has to be taught to the next generation unless we want a replay of the Tower of Babel bit around 1984." (1997:190 - my emphasis). Here too we have a case of moral panicking, quantifiable perhaps with hindsight but not in its day.

Having said this, one could still think of some cases where the disproportionality of a proposed moral panic about language might be addressed quantitatively. For example, Phillips’ suggestion that school-leavers are having difficulty filling out job applications can be checked empirically, as can the question of whether modern-languages graduates are leaving university with only ‘pidgin French or German’. Quite apart from Phillips’ loaded (and inaccurate) use of ‘pidgin’ to denote a faulty command of linguistic structure, it is generally possible to test grammatical accuracy in second language learning.

In conclusion, although there may be ways of measuring disproportionality in some cases, it is clear that the existence of a quantifiable problem is not necessarily the most crucial element of a moral panic. In many cases, the fact that people believe there is a cause for panic is in itself sufficient. It is here that the discursive construction and/or representation of the perceived problem becomes the more obvious focus of analysis.

3.3 Why the Panic (again)?

In the 1970s moral panic theory was used primarily to explore more or less discrete episodes of public concern (Mods and Rockers, mugging etc). By the 1980s, however, the concept saw a decline in popularity. Against the backdrop of the emergence of the new Right, Anglo-American theorists turned their attention to the wider structures and ideological trends underpinning social change. To this end, moral panic theory, with its apparent focus on the isolated symptoms - as opposed to the underlying causes - of such change, was felt by many to be inadequate (see Thompson, 1998:139-40). For Simon Watney, the main problem related to the kinds of concerns touched upon in the previous two sections:

Moral panic theory is always obliged in the final instance to refer and contrast "representation" to the arbitration of "the real", and is hence unable to develop a full theory concerning the operations of ideology within all representational systems. Moral panics seem to appear and disappear, as if representation were not the site of permanent ideological struggle of the meaning of signs. A
particular "moral panic" merely marks the site of the current front-line in such struggles.

(1987:41-2)

But the 1990s have, in Thompson’s view, forced a reappraisal of the concept (1998:2). He argues convincingly that, with a more eclectic approach, theorists can indeed show how moral panics are more than simply ‘the current front-line’ of struggles which are nonetheless ontologically detached from broader social trends (ibid). On the contrary, one might go so far as to suggest that moral panics are beginning to play a more or less permanent role in the kind of ‘arbitration of reality’ which Watney had in mind.

Moral panics have been with us for a long time (see Goode/Ben-Yehuda, 1994). But Thompson proposes that it would be misleading to see current panics as a mere continuation of earlier episodes (ibid:1-2). This is because, in his view, modern panics differ in two main ways from those analysed in say the 1970s. First of all, he proposes that there is a growing rapidity in their occurrence, with the time between individual cases becoming increasingly short. Second, the subjects of such panics have become more pervasive, with a wider range of issues seemingly capable of sparking off a panic (ibid:2). I shall consider these two points in reverse order.

The increasing pervasiveness of the moral panic is a phenomenon which Thompson sees as emanating from the "rapid social change and growing social pluralism" characteristic of the current epoch variously known as late modernity or postmodernity (ibid:11). He argues that whereas earlier phases of modernisation in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries brought with them a very real but nonetheless localised sense of risk, the techno-economic progress characteristic of late modernity has rendered many people conscious of risk on a much greater global scale (ibid). This is the essence of Ulrich Beck’s notion of a ‘risk society’ (1992, 1996), which, in the context of moral panic studies, is not inherently dissimilar to Cohen’s ‘politics of anxiety’. Thompson proposes that Beck’s concept of risk might be usefully incorporated into the study of moral panics as a means of exploring why people are possibly becoming increasingly susceptible to the suggestions of risk inherent in all episodes of moral panicking (1998:22-4).

Whether one would agree with Beck’s assertion that the concept of ‘risk’ in late modernity might usefully replace more traditionally Marxist notions of ‘industrial’ or ‘class society’ is a moot point (see Thompson, 1998:23). Even so, what the notion of a

__For an in-depth account of such panics on topics ranging from video nasties, rave culture, girl gangs and sex on TV, see Thompson (1998).__
‘risk society’ cannot explain by itself is the increasing rapidity with which moral panics would appear to be occurring. Here one has to turn to those individuals and groups who, in an attempt to defend what they see as their own social, cultural and economic privileges, may have a vested interest in intensifying the perception of risk (ibid:141). These may include individual moral entrepreneurs and interest groups, but in particular the media.

We have seen throughout how the role of the media is undeniably central to the discursive construction of moral panics. However, the growing rapidity of panics must also be placed in the wider context of economic developments affecting the media which typify late modernity. This is because the deregulation and commercialisation of media markets, themselves a product of globalisation, place journalists and programme makers under even greater pressure to supply potential audiences with the kind of news and entertainment which will allow them to stave off competitors in the sales and ratings wars. Particularly suited to that end are dramatic, highly personalised news stories with a strong moral content. If the primary value of a given news item fails to fit this particular bill, then perhaps more than ever before it must be made to do so by inferring deeper, secondary meanings. To put it very simply: market pressures, to which all areas of the media are subject, are fuelling the signification spirals and processes of convergence typical of moral panics.

The British tabloid press has, according to Thompson, traditionally led the market where moral panics have been concerned (ibid:27). This he relates partly to the historical dominance of the tabloids. Recently, however, economic factors have forced even the so-called quality broadsheets in Britain such as the Guardian, Independent and Times to undergo a degree of ‘tabloidisation’. This has occurred both metaphorically, in the sense of content and style of coverage, and literally, in terms of the addition of a tabloid section to their daily broadsheet in the case of the Guardian and Independent. The BBC has similarly found itself subject to market pressures in the light of increasing rivalry with non-terrestrial, commercial channels (ibid:28). Thompson also notes how the traditionally centralised nature of the British media has probably provided a more fertile ground for panics on a national level than in those countries where more localised and regional media structures prevail. However, such countries are by no means immune to the effects of globalisation and the ensuing centralisation of media markets, implying that these too might see a proliferation of moral panics in the future (ibid:27-9).

In summary, Thompson proposes that a reappraisal of moral panics as a feature of late modernity might take into account the following:
1. **Structural changes:** "such as economic restructuring and deregulation, immigration and international population flows, changes in the division of labour (including the domestic division of labour and gender roles)."

2. **Technological changes:** "in communication technologies, such as computerised newspaper production, satellite broadcasting, cable, video and the Internet."

3. **Cultural changes:** for example, "increased ‘multiculturalism’ in the broadest sense, fragmentation of cultures, and conflicts over identity, lifestyles and morals."

(ibid:140)

That such structural, technological and cultural changes are all in some way linked to *discourse* has been well documented, not least in the work of critical discourse analysts such as Norman Fairclough. Moreover, as Fairclough emphasises, discourse and social change are themselves caught up in a dialectical relationship, whereby broader patterns of social change are both reflected *in* and constructed *through* discursive practices (1992:65). In this respect, I would certainly agree with Thompson that there is considerable potential for integrating (Foucauldian) concepts of discourse and discursive formations into the study of moral panics (1998:24-6). As we have seen throughout, moral panics are most likely to flourish in situations where perceived ‘problems’ can be mapped onto already-existing world-views, and there are many ways in which the insights afforded by discourse analysis can further our understanding of such processes. It might, for example, be possible to elaborate upon the ideas of Hall et al on signification spirals and processes of convergence through a more systematic analysis of the texts via which moral panics are both documented and constructed. Moreover, by incorporating models of intertextuality and dialogism, we would be able to provide a fuller account of the dialectical relationship between moral campaigners and interest groups, on the one hand, and the media, on the other.

But I see a further prospect where the relationship between moral panic studies and linguistic theory is concerned. This is because there is not only potential for exploring the discourse of moral panics as one of the means by which social realities are both represented and constructed in general terms. I also see moral panics about language as *discourses of language* which are part of a broader process whereby access to discourse is policed.

The suggestion that discourses of language may take on a regulatory role in social life is by no means new. That public disputes over language often function as a vicarious
expression of resistance to social change is something to which conflicts over so-called political correctness in Anglo-American culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s bore adequate testimony (see Dunant, 1994; Cameron, 1995:116-65; Newfield and Strickland, 1995). This is also the essence of Cameron’s concept of ‘verbal hygiene’ - people’s everyday, ongoing attempts to monitor or prescribe the language usage of others as a means of regulating social change (1995). But it seems increasingly likely that in many cultural contexts this regulatory function of language might well be one of the last means by which social control can be legitimately articulated - the ultimate politics of substitution, if you will. As Rosina Lippi-Green points out in her excellent study of discrimination on the basis of accent in the US:

> Accent serves as the first point of gatekeeping because we are forbidden by law and social custom, and perhaps by a prevailing sense of what is morally and ethically right, from using race, ethnicity, homeland or economics more directly. We have no such compunctions about language, however. Thus, accent becomes a litmus test for exclusion, an excuse to turn away, to refuse to recognise the other.

(1997:64 - my italics)

The point need not of course be limited to accent or indeed spoken language. But either way, discrimination on the basis of language is one important means by discursive frames are constructed, restricting in turn access to discourse and ultimately social power. Thus, Lippi-Green has the following to say about what she calls ‘standard language ideology’, the mainstream philosophy in the US in which the ultimate - though crucially unachievable - goal is that everyone speak with the same accent:

> It would be useful, at this juncture, to remind ourselves that standard language ideology is concerned not so much with the choice of one possible variant, but with the elimination of socially unacceptable difference. This is externalised in the targeting of particular variants linked to specific social identities. The subordination process seeks to limit access to discourse on the basis of language, silencing many before their message can be heard.

(1997:173 - author’s own italics/my underscore)

It is here that I see considerable potential for the concept of moral panics about language: using public debates on language to document a) the manner in which public concerns about language function as a vicarious front-line for other social conflicts; and b) the way in which the views on language thereby expressed represent not only
attempts to regulate the language usage of others but ultimately to eliminate some on
the grounds of ‘socially unacceptable difference’. And it might be worth adding that
this by no means implies the reduction of all forms of reality to a product of discourse
- on the contrary, the exclusion of difference on the basis of language usage has very
real consequences in the material world for its victims. As Lippi-Green (1997) has
amply demonstrated in her study of workplace discrimination: people are still losing
their jobs for speaking English with an accent...

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