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Not always a 'yes or no' answer

Yes and *no* are such common words of English that it comes as a surprise to learn that approximately half the languages in the world have no such words. Such languages (which include the Celtic languages, Japanese and Chinese) provide answers not by using special words, but by echoing the question.

So if someone asks you, *Are you coming to the movies?*, you might answer, *Coming*. And if someone asks, *Did you see Titanic?*, you might answer, *Not see*.

Positive questions (like *Can you see the car?*) are relatively easy to cope with on a world scale. Negative questions (like *Can't you see the car?*) are much harder. To start with, there is the problem of how to answer a negative question if you only have two choices.

If someone asks, *Can't you see the car?* in English, and you answer, *Yes*, you probably (but not invariably) mean that you can see the car.

If you got the same question in Japanese, and you answered with a word which usually translates as 'yes', you would be interpreted as saying 'Yes, I agree with the proposition in the question, namely that I cannot see the car'.

While either might be entirely logical, meeting one if you are used to the other can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Some languages (including French, German, Swedish) have a special yes-word for answering negative questions.

In Danish, for instance, if you are asked *Can you see the car?* and you can, you answer *Ja*, which means 'Yes, I can see the car'. But if you are asked *Can't you see the car?*, and you can see the car, you answer, *Jo*, which means 'Yes, despite the implications of the question, I can see the car'.

The word *Nej* ('no') will mean that you cannot see the car in response to either question.

Other languages have a four-way system. Interestingly, English was one such language in pre-Shakespearean times. The four terms were *yes*, *yea*, *no* and *nay*. *Yes* and *no* were answers to negative questions: *Can't you come? Yes!* (that is, I can come); *Can't you come? No!* (that is, I can't come); *Can you come? Yea!* (that is, I can come); *Can you come? Nay!* (that is, I can't come).

Shakespeare knew all four words but had lost the system; writers not long after his time thought the whole thing was unnecessary and silly. Note that it is the answers to negative questions which have persisted.

Romanian is another language that has a four-way system, which works in much the same way as the now-obsolete English system.

Other systems are possible, too. In the English House of Lords, members vote *Content* if they are in favour of a motion and *Not content* if they are not. In more colloquial English, we can say *Right* or *Fine* if we are in favour of something. One way of showing agreement in Latin was to say *Placet* – 'it pleases'.

The origin of the word *Yes* is not clear but may arise from a phrase meaning something like 'So be it'. The origin of the alternative *aye*, now used mainly in northern Britain as showing agreement, but used at sea and in voting in some parliaments including New Zealand's, is equally obscure, and also remarkably modern, arising in the 16th century.

And however much you might hate *Yeah no*, it is not a contradiction. Its meaning varies quite a lot, but in some uses the *yeah* is an acknowledgement of what has been said, while the *no* shows disagreement, often mitigated disagreement.



Refugees suffer when drawbridge is raised



Donna Miles

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I was in London when Rishi Sunak, a British Hindu of Indian heritage, became the first prime minister of colour in a country that once ruled India, much of Africa and a great deal beyond.

None of my British friends thought his appointment would help marginalised groups. My conservative friends hoped he might bring some economic stability. My leftist friends criticised the undemocratic transition of power and said the only minority group that Sunak represented was Britain's small class of oligarchs.

When I lived in the UK, in the mid-80s, brown people were almost invisible in positions of power and often referred to as 'P.ki's – a racial slur directed indiscriminately at people who were South Asians or physically resembled them.

The UK has become much more tolerant, so much so that when a Greek acquaintance said he was sure the Tories would not elect a brown prime minister, I was prepared to bet money that they would. So when Sunak won, I was £20 richer and felt glad that, at least symbolically, the UK was leaving behind the old world.

I say "symbolically" because a great deal of the prime minister's proposed policies, especially around immigration and asylum, denies others the same chances as his parents were given when they emigrated from East Africa to the UK in the 60s.

Sunak's elevation was announced at the beginning of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, that provides, among other things, a time for self-reflection. Sunak would have done well to reflect on his own family migration history and the impact of his policies on desperate people fleeing war and persecution.

Sunak and Home Secretary Suella Braverman, also of Indian descent, are proposing policies that many, even senior Tories, have dismissed as "sickening" and probably "unworkable". Policies such as detaining or deporting child refugees who arrive on boats, and shipping to Rwanda asylum seekers reaching the UK by crossing the channel.

The Rwanda plan was first introduced by the

previous Tory Home Secretary, Priti Patel, whose family fled Uganda after brutal dictator Idi Amin stripped all Ugandan Asians of their assets and ordered them to leave the country. In the 70s, the Ugandan Asians were settled within weeks in the UK. Families of some of the same refugees are asking what happened to the UK.

The reality is that refugees are a convenient scapegoat for politicians to distract voters from the main issues facing the country.

Twelve years of conservative rule have put the country under effective self-sanction via Brexit. Everyone seems to be on strike. The cost of living is through the roof. UK rivers and seas are full of raw sewage. The health system is falling apart and the country's economic growth forecast is worse than any other in the developed world.

To distract from all these issues, Tories, copying from Australia, have decided to make "stop the boats" their main political slogan. And who better to introduce policies that hurt people of colour the most, than people of colour who cannot be accused of racism?

The drawbridge mentality is not limited to the UK. Many European right-wing populists, who espouse anti-immigrant policies, themselves turn out to be descended from immigrants.

In New Zealand, we have our own version of the same phenomenon. NZ First's Winston Peters and ACT's David Seymour are of Māori descent – and yet are not known for their advocacy for Māori. Peters used his first speech since losing power to attack the increased usage of *te reo* in public life – particularly the phrase "Aotearoa".

Rawiri Waititi, co-leader of Te Pāti Māori, referring to Seymour's proposal to abolish Te Puni Kōkiri/The Ministry of Māori Development and the Office of Māori Crown Relations, said Seymour was weaponising his Māori whakapapa against his own people.

The drawbridge mentality is not limited to politicians either. Many immigrant groups in various countries have attempted to distance themselves from new arrivals in order to avoid being associated with negative stereotypes and discrimination. Author and refugee advocate Behrouz Boochani told me that many immigrants supported Australia's cruel offshore asylum system. Some of my own Iranian friends prefer policies that would limit the number of immigrants in New Zealand.

In all these situations, I can't help but think internalised racism plays a part. But whatever the cause, it is truly disappointing to see privileged people pulling up the ladder behind them. What we need is shared wellbeing, not diverse shades of manipulation and inequality.

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