

Session 5 – Cultural Collaboration and Conflict Through Languages and the Arts
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“Civilisation” and other meta-categories: How they work and how to do without them.

PROFESSOR CLIFF GODDARD FAHA

Griffith University

@cliff_goddard



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**CLASH OF
CIVILISATIONS?**

Where are we now?



A quick look at “tradition”

Collocations

follow ~, maintain ~, continue ~

break with ~, ignore/disregard/defy ~,

bound by ~

~ holds/dictates/demands, by ~

a ~ dating back ..., handed down by ~,

(age-old) customs and ~s

Western ~, Chinese ~, Christian/Jewish ~,

religious ~

Example

“Passing on Hindu traditions to the younger generation has always been a duty of parents”.

Polysemy

in the ~ of ..., a family ~, a club ~

it can be like this for some time in some places:

people do some things because they think like this:

“for a long time before many people in this place did some things
in the same way

they did this because they thought about some things in the same way

many of these people are not living anymore

it is good if we do these things in the same way now, we want to do these
things as these other people did such things before (us)

it will be good if people here want to do these things in the same way
for a long time after (us), when we are not living anymore”



“Civilisation ”

Collocations

*Egyptian ~, Roman~, Western ~, ancient ~
great ~, an alien ~*

*birth of ~, emergence of ~, dawn/cradle of ~
rise and fall of ~s*

the benefits of ~

ruins, monuments, artwork

**primitive ~, ?new ~*

Example

*“Egyptian civilisation - the first of the world's
great civilisations - saw the beginnings of
medical care as we know it today.”*

for a long time it is like this in one part of the earth:

people in this part of the earth live not like people lived before,
they live not like people live in many other parts of the earth

people in this part of the earth live like this:

- [“cities”, “society”, “cooperation”]
- [“skills”, “artefacts/tools”]
- [“agriculture”]
- [“buildings”]
- [“learning”]

people in this part of the earth think about many things in the same way

- [“laws”, “authority”]
- [“sense of superiority”]
- [“wisdom”, “religion”]

people can think about it like this:

all this is very good

it was not always like this, it is like this now because many people

did many things before for a long time

it is very good for people if it is like this



for a long time it is like this in one part of the earth:

people in this part of the earth live not like people lived before, they live not like people live in many other parts of the earth

people in this part of the earth live like this:

- many of them live in the same places for a long time, they often speak to many other people there, they often do many things with other people there
- these people can do many things very well, they can make very good things of many kinds
- some of them do some things to the ground in many places, because they want good things of some kinds to grow there
- some of them build things in many places
- some of them know much about many things, other people can know the same things because these people can write

people in this part of the earth think about many things in the same way

– they can think like this:

“people here can’t do some things, at the same time they can’t not do some other things
it is like this because someone above many other people says so, it is like this because the law says so
everyone knows this, this is good”

– they can think like this: “we are above people in other parts of the earth”

– they can think in the same way about things such as this:

how people can live if they want to live well, why there are people on earth, what happens to people after they die

people can think about it like this:

all this is very good

it was not always like this, it is like this now because many people did many things before for a long time

it is very good for people if it is like this



文明 wénmíng (with thanks to Zhengdao Ye, ANU)

中华文明 Zhōnghuá wénmíng [Zhōnghuá ‘Chinese nation’]

西方文明 xīfāng wénmíng [xīfāng ‘west’]

五千年的中华文明 wǔqiān nián de Zhōnghuá wénmíng [five-thousand-year (de) Chinese civilization]

The high-frequency expression 中华文明 “Chinese *wénmíng*” is overwhelmingly positive. Collocates with modifiers such as 灿烂 ‘magnificent/splendid’.

我们是五千年的文明古国

We are an ancient country enjoying five-thousand years of civilization.

开展好中华文明与伊斯兰文明等不同文明的对话。

... to carry out dialogue between different civilisations, such as Chinese civilisation and Islamic civilisation.

Likely differences with English *civilisation* include

- *Wénmíng* implies a greater time-span (‘a very long time’)
- It includes some components akin to those in English *tradition*, i.e. greater emphasis on “continuity” and “intergenerational transmission”.
- “Chinese *wénmíng*” is clearly the most outstanding and impressive example of *wénmíng*.



Where are we today?

The trouble with the “civilisation concept”

- It primes the discourse towards oppositions and power (*civilisations* are “big and powerful”). Compare *civilization*, in this regard, with *tradition* and *culture*.
- It is geopolitical (‘in one part of the earth’), and tends toward the monolithic (on account of implication of “same-ness”).
- It is “all good”.
- It does not travel well across language barriers. Many languages have no such word. *Civilisation* and 文明 impart different conceptual spins.

Re-framing the discourse without the “civilisation concept”

- We would do better to identify and discuss the important ideas separately and more specifically, using the clearest and simplest terms possible, cf. Minimal English.
- If a banner term is needed, less loaded terms, such as *tradition* and *culture*, would serve us better.

Other references are available on request

