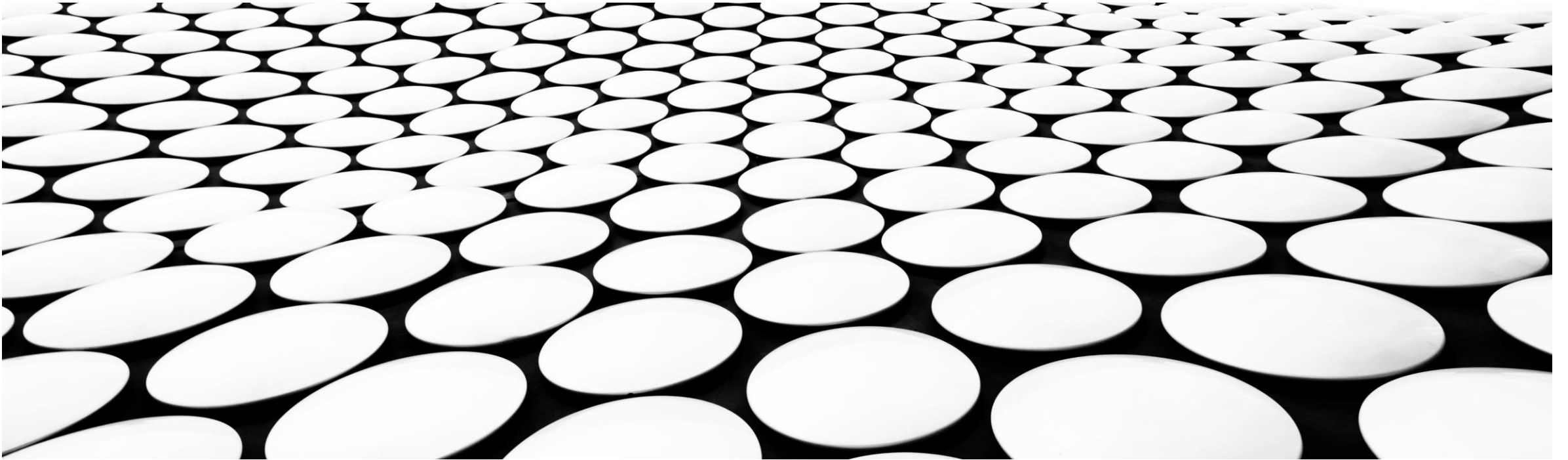


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# ESSENTIALISM & ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER?





# OUTLINE

- What is essentialism?
- How is it transmitted?
- Why is it relevant to language teaching?
- Thoughts

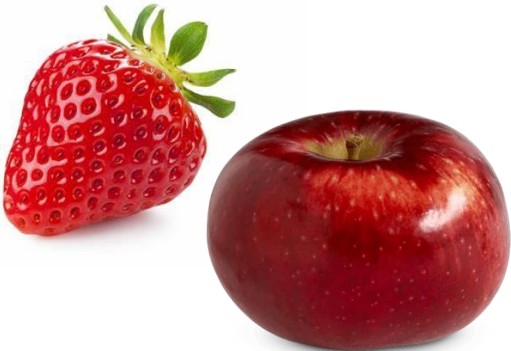
# ESSENTIALISM



**PROBABLY NOT LIKE THIS....**



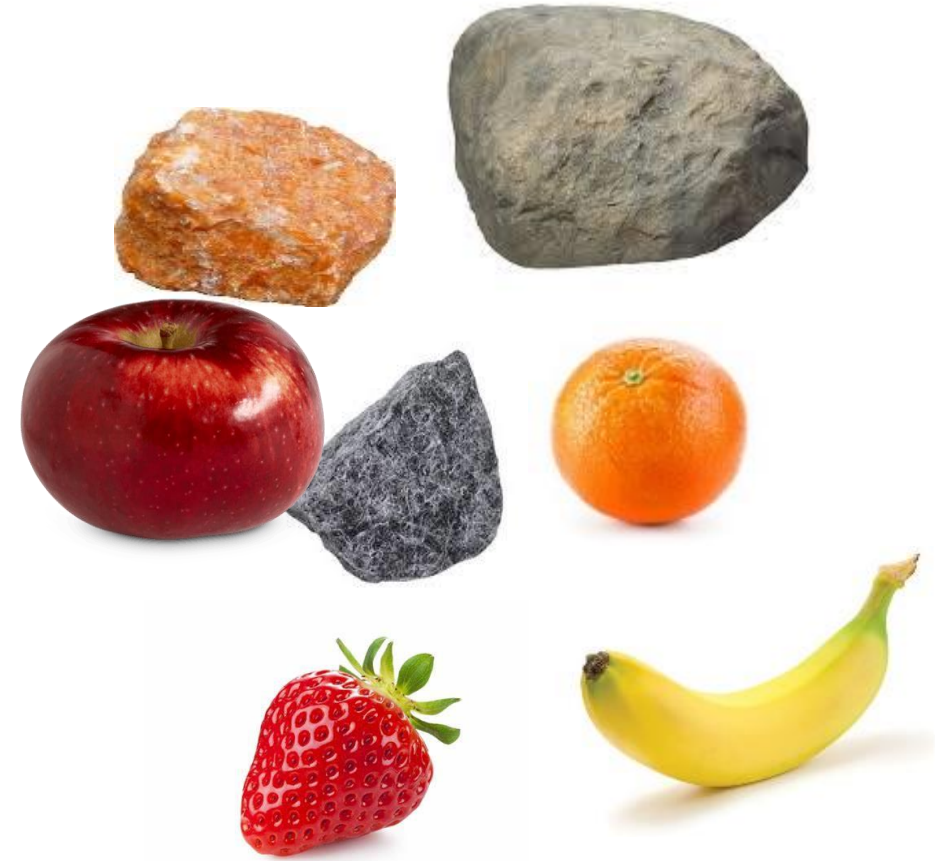
Colour



**Or this...**



Hairy



Not hairy



# BUT PROBABLY LIKE THIS...

## FRUITS



## ROCKS



## BIG CATS





## ESSENTIALISM

- Certain items form natural groups based on essential traits
- “The essentialist is committed to the view that humans can come to know the essence of things..... Knowledge of essence is the conformity of the mind to the natures of things.” (Oderberg, 2005:19)
- Essentialism of natural groups can be beneficial (Rhodes et al., 2012)

# SOCIAL ESSENTIALISM

- “the belief that certain social categories mark fundamentally distinct kinds of people” (Rhodes et al., 2012: 13526)





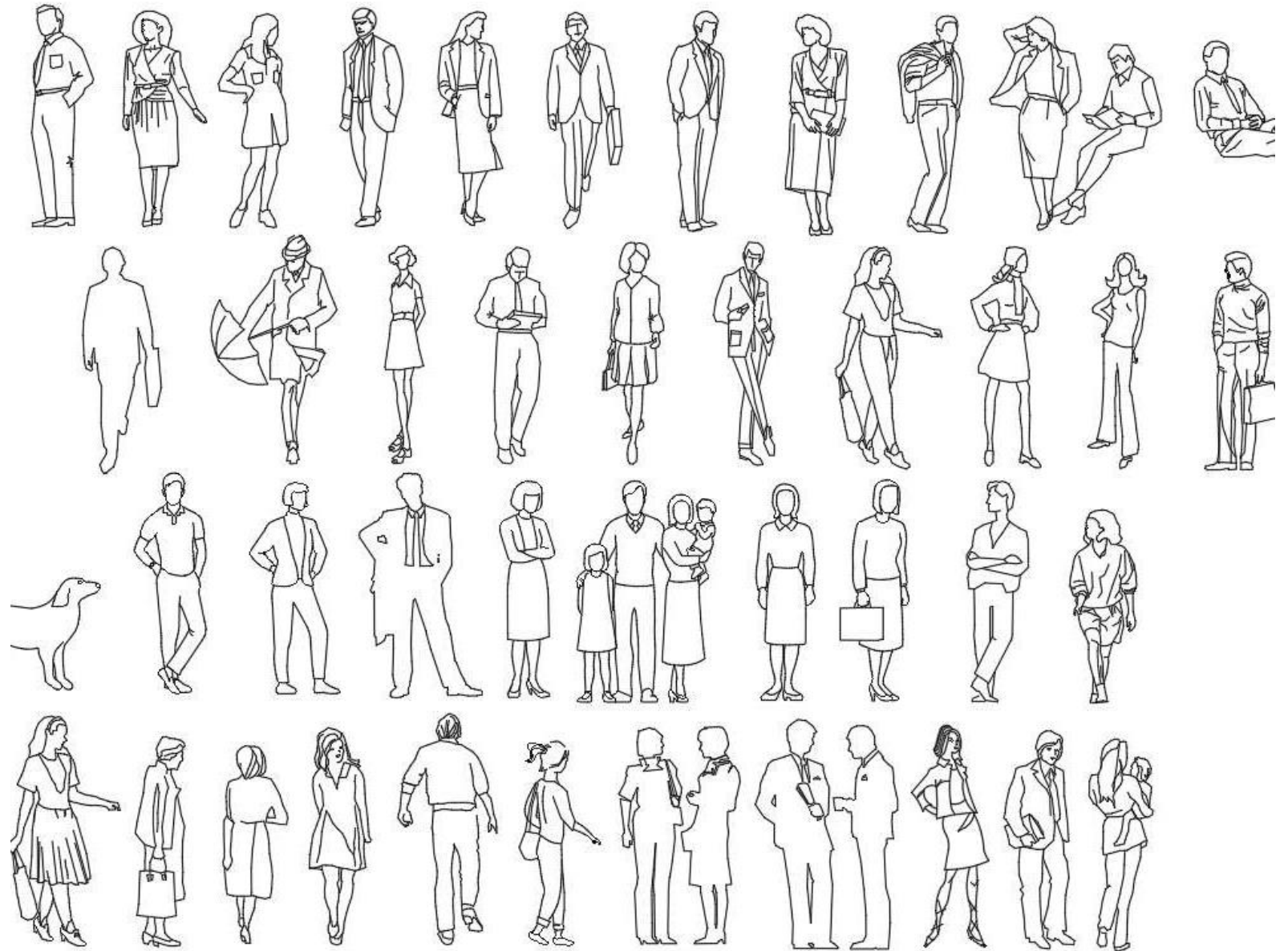
# SOCIAL ESSENTIALISM

- 1. Attributing specific characteristics to all members within a particular group or category (“All Japanese are polite”)
- 2. Attributing these specific characteristics to the category (“He is polite because he is Japanese”)
- 3. The creation of a collective which is presumed to be an homogeneous block (“We Japanese .... / You Japanese....”)
- 4. The “policing” of the category in a way that non-adherence undermines membership. (“He is not really Japanese because he is not polite”)

(Philips, 2010)

# SOCIAL ESSENTIALISM

- Essentialism can lead to stereotyping, racism and other forms of discrimination (Kumaraviladivelu, 2008; Jackson, 2014)
- Social essentialism, like essentialism, appears to be universal, but contextually specific (Rhodes et al., 2012)





# **WHAT CREATES THE DIFFERENCE?**

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# TRANSMISSION?

## Generic Language

vs

## Non-generic Language

Girls have long hair

That girl has long hair

Jews celebrate Passover

Some Jews celebrate Passover

Italians love pasta

Many Italians love pasta



# Meet the Zarpies



## Generic Language

Zarpies are afraid of ladybugs.

## Non-generic Language

This Zarpie is afraid of ladybugs



# ZARPIES: LANGUAGE DIRECTS SOCIAL ESSENTIALISM

When Generic Language Used....

- 1. More likely to assume all Zarpies share the same traits (essentialist belief)
- 2. More likely to use generic language themselves when talking about Zarpies
- 3. More likely to result in negative evaluations of Zarpies

The opposite of these points was true for non-generic language



# RELEVANCE TO LANGUAGE TEACHING?

## Careful Consideration of Language

- “TESOL has always had as its goal the facilitation of **communication** among people who do not share the same language and national **culture**.” (Kramsch, 2001:201)
- We are preparing our students for interactions with the Other.
- Possible that second language learning / use has little impact on a persons beliefs (1<sup>st</sup> language most important). But the language they use impacts others – transmits essentialism, damages interaction with their intercultural partner

**A**

Americans are fatter than people in other countries. Much research has been done and the evidence shows that Americans eat a lot more fatty foods than people in other countries. The reason is that American food is very unhealthy and served in big portions.

Americans are also very loud and speak in a direct way. Other people find this very rude because it is different to their own way of communicating. The best way to speak to Americans is to be direct too because this is their preferred way of communication.

**B**

Americans tend to be fatter than people in most other countries. Much research has been done and the evidence suggests that Americans generally eat more fatty foods than people in other countries. One possible reason may be that American food is usually unhealthier and often served in big portions.

Some people in America may have a tendency to be louder and perhaps speak in a more direct way than some people in other countries. Some people might find this to be rude because it could be different to their own cultural way of communicating. One of the best ways to speak to Americans might be to be direct too because this is generally seen as their preferred way of communication.





# FLUENCY?

## Speaking Freely

- “Policing” language gets in the way of fluency development?
- Students coming might have beliefs reified rather than broken down by such language / discussion?



## THOUGHTS?

- Do you think that breaking down essentialized views is a goal of the language teacher?
- Does a focus on developing increased language awareness (generic vs non-generic) slow fluency development?
- Might unchecked fluency development result in reinforcing or creating stereotypes rather than breaking them down?
- What might be some good activities that promote fluency while also developing language skills that avoid language that could transmit essentialism?



## REFERENCES

- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2008). *Cultural globalization and language education*. New Haven: University of Yale Press.
- Phillips, A. (2010). What's wrong with essentialism? *Distinktion: Scandinavian journal of social theory*, 11 (1), 47-60.
- Rhodes, M., Leslie, S., Tworek, C.M. (2012) Cultural transmission of social essentialism. *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences)* 109(34). pp 13526-13531.

<p><b>David (M) French</b>  <b>Construction manger</b>  <b>28 years old</b>  <b>Married. No children</b>  <b>Sporty, ambitious.</b>  <b>Likes sports cars, extreme sports, hiking, fashion</b></p>	<p><b>Rosa (F) Mexican</b>  <b>Architect</b>  <b>34 years old</b>  <b>Married. Two children</b>  <b>Funny, cynical</b>  <b>Likes reading history, watching movies</b></p>	<p><b>Takuya (M) Japanese</b>  <b>Policeman</b>  <b>55 years old</b>  <b>Single. No children.</b>  <b>Talkative, outgoing</b>  <b>Likes watching movies, going to concerts, drinking</b></p>	<p><b>Marie (F) French</b>  <b>Cashier</b>  <b>19 years old</b>  <b>In a relationship.</b>  <b>Quiet, reserved</b>  <b>Likes cooking, eating out, reading</b></p>
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<p><b>Satomi (F) Japanese</b>  <b>Secretary</b>  <b>23 years old</b>  <b>In a relationship</b>  <b>Shy, dependable</b>  <b>Likes classical music, cooking, reading novels</b></p>	<p><b>Lin (F) Chinese</b>  <b>Doctor</b>  <b>38 years old</b>  <b>Married. One child</b>  <b>Easy going, cheerful</b>  <b>Likes playing the violin, romantic movies, dogs</b></p>	<p><b>Eduardo (M) Mexican</b>  <b>Chef</b>  <b>49 years old</b>  <b>Married. Five children.</b>  <b>Hard working, honest</b>  <b>Likes soccer, time with family, gardening</b></p>	<p><b>Wang (M) Chinese</b>  <b>Butcher</b>  <b>20 years old</b>  <b>Single. No children.</b>  <b>Quiet, reliable</b>  <b>Likes reading, hiking, visiting historical sites</b></p>
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