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Buckledee S. (2018). *The Language of Brexit: How Britain Talked Its Way Out of the European Union*. London/ New York: Bloomsbury. 240 pages; ISBN: 9781350047976; £49.50 (hbk), £16.19 (ppb), £15.54 (e-book).

Here is a book that surpasses the definition of timely. We rarely see scholarly publications which can keep up with current affairs. Academic research, in fact, takes a long time to conduct and is usually doomed to ‘perpetual untimeliness’ (Marchi 2019). Steve Buckledee, however, managed to deliver a study of the language of Brexit at the very peak of Brexit newsworthiness. The book came out at the start of the negotiations and I am writing these words in the midst of the fierce deal /no-deal dispute, as the story of Brexit still unfolds and is far from being over. Buckledee says in the conclusion of the book that he intended to end his work with the result of the referendum, on June 23rd 2016, but the result at the polls surprised most people, including the author, and the victory of “leave” meant that Brexit had really only just started.

‘A book, unlike the EU-UK soap’, writes Buckledee, ‘must, sooner or later, come to an end, and this one ends precisely when the talks to decide what kind of Brexit emerges are just beginning. There is no right time to key in the final full-stop when further twists in the plot are sure to come, but not to do so at all would render the whole enterprise futile’ (p. 202). Researchers interested in studying ‘areas of pressing concern’¹ can certainly empathise with the reluctance to stop the analysis, which transpires from the author’s words, and yet it is precisely the “unfinishedness” of Brexit that makes this book about the discourses of the referendum campaign all the more well-timed and all the more relevant.

I am sure that had it been titled *The Language of Brexit: How Britain **Almost** Talked Its Way Out of the European Union*, this book would have been just as interesting, but “bad news” makes better research material. It is not accidental that there are likely more studies on Donald Trump’s tweets than on anything Barack Obama said in his eight years of presidency and there is little doubt about what this means in terms of evaluation. We tend to be

more interested in studying negative discourses (for example the language of racism, homophobia, sexism, and so on) than positive ones.

Buckledee states upfront where he stands in the introduction. This is an honest and useful exercise of self-reflexivity and his positions are very discernible throughout the book. This is definitely not a Brexit-critical book, though; it is rather a piece of work passionately interested in the persuasive power of language.

In fifteen chapters, plus a brief introduction and a brilliant epilogue, the author tackles some salient linguistic features which have characterised the Brexit campaign on both fronts (including the discourse of the less conspicuous Lexit² supporters), and demonstrates how the linguistic strategies employed by pro-Leave campaigners were remarkably more effective than language choices taken up by the pro-Remain side. Language, he admits, is not the sole responsible of the electoral result, yet it emerges clearly from the analysis that the pro-Leave side's commitment to the campaign – a commitment that finds its manifestation in the way Brexiteers talked and wrote – must have had a decisive role in winning. What emerges even more convincingly is how the pro-Remain lack of commitment (their often 'dispassionate' and 'spiritless language', as the author says) must have heavily influenced their defeat.

The book is distinctively divided into two sections. The first part consists of eight short (sometimes very short) chapters each addressing a specific linguistic feature characterising the ways Brexit was discussed (for example, the use of hedging and modality, imperatives, personal pronouns, and so on). The second part looks beyond the immediate context of Brexit and adopts a comparative approach; in chapter 9, for example, the Brexit referendum campaign is compared to the Scottish independence referendum, while chapters 11 and 12 investigate some essential historical parallelisms.

All chapters are extremely well written, never tedious, often outright amusing, and there is something for everyone. Paradoxically, though, the more explicitly linguistic first part of the book will be most likely enjoyable and useful for non-linguists. This book appears to be written for a wide audience and has indeed the merit of being highly accessible, without needing any sort of background in linguistics. The author has the great ability of explaining complex linguistic concepts and making trade jargon transparent to non-experts: someone who has never heard of hedging, or has not considered before the effects of using different modal verbs (discussed in chapter 2), will immediately get the idea of the pervasive power of language. For this reason the book is a valuable teaching resource for undergraduate courses, especially as an introduction to language and discourse studies for audiences coming from different disciplines.

Linguists who read *The Language of Brexit* will probably be engaged by the rich historical and political contextualisation the author manages to convey with brief but comprehensive summaries at the beginning of each chapter

(particularly in the second part of the volume). For instance, readers interested in the British press are in for a real treat with chapter 12, which in just ten pages gives us a brief history and a condensed analysis of *The Sun*. On the other hand, Linguistics scholars might find the presentation of the research rather flimsy. Accessibility has sometimes the limit of oversimplification and lack of depth. The representation of Europe in the British press (and in politics) has been a rather popular topic in linguistics for the past twenty years (Hardt-Mautner 1995, Teubert 2001, Bayley & Williams eds. 2012, Partington & Zuccato 2018, just to offer a couple of early examples and a couple of recent ones), but there is no reference to any of the literature, or indeed any other single study on the topic, in the book. The target audience itself is an implicit explanation of why previous research may not be necessarily relevant to the analysis, as the book does not seem to be intended for academic purposes; nevertheless, I believe the existence of a vast bibliography on the subject should be acknowledged, if not incorporated, in the analysis.

Another objection which may be raised by academic readers, particularly those working in Applied Linguistics, is that the definition of the dataset is rather vague. The analysis seems to conflate different kinds of data; this results in an accumulation of evidence which needs finer grained distinctions. I appreciated the variety of sources used as well as the multisemiotic effort (the author reflects on the importance of graphical choices and acknowledges the fact that it would be interesting and relevant to study images as well as text). The broad coverage, however, is not matched by a systematic treatment of the data and the corpus composition (or its size) itself is not entirely clear. While the author's interpretations and argumentations are convincing, the presentation of the findings tends to be tentative. For instance, all quantifications of linguistic features are approximations (e.g. "remarkable frequency", "extraordinary frequency", "considerable space", and so on). The analysis would have benefited from a more rigorous handling of data and report on the results.

Despite these concerns, *The Language of Brexit* is an important resource for anyone interested in political discourse. It fits well in the recently very prolific trend of research on populist discourse (for example, Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benitez-Castro 2019) and it represents a good start in what we can expect to be a rich literature on the topic of Brexit (most recently Koller et al. 2019 that appropriately came out just days before the March 29th Brexit deadline). Perhaps most importantly, *The Language of Brexit* should be mandatory reading beyond academia, for press officers, speech writers and politicians, especially those involved in the disastrous pro-Remain campaign.

Notes

- 1 Lancaster's Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences (CASS) website (<http://cass.lancs.ac.uk/>) describes in these terms the interest in current affairs of the centre, which is also the focus of much research in Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies at large.
- 2 Lexit (a blend of Left and Brexit) identified the left wing "leave" campaign for the referendum.

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