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Abstract

This paper looks at how readers on an Austrian news website convey humour and emotion in a live text commentary on a House of Commons debate on Brexit. Based on pragmatic theories of humour as well as the affect component of the appraisal system (Martin & White, 2005), the study investigates an example of the new activity type of live streamed videos combined with journalists' posts and readers' live commentary, thereby further developing previous work in online communication. The pragmatic and functional analysis of nine hours of live text commentary shows that humour is co-constructed through wordplay, parody and metaphor, fostering in-group solidarity. Negative emotions dominate in the commentary and are closely linked to especially contestive humour. Expressions of, and references to, both humour and emotion serve to strengthen the community of practice and to alleviate frustration with the Brexit process. Frequent comparisons of the parliamentary debate with sports events and cinematic entertainment indicate that the debate is perceived as an amusing spectacle, while negative emotions are extended to the United Kingdom as a whole.

Key words: *emotion, humour, live text commentary, online communication, parliamentary debates*

1. Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the way Brexit debates in the British House of Commons were received by, and enabled interaction between, readers on an Austrian news forum. After the referendum in June 2016 on Britain's EU membership had delivered a small majority for leaving the union, then Prime Minister Theresa May invoked the so-called Article 50 at the end of March 2017, meaning that the UK would leave the EU two years later. However, the significant divisions and upheaval in British politics brought about by the referendum meant that parliament refused to pass the withdrawal agreement that the government of Theresa May had negotiated with the EU, leading to the original Brexit date of 29 March 2019 to be postponed by seven months. It

would take a renegotiated withdrawal agreement, another extension and the third general election in less than four years for the UK to leave the EU on 31 January 2020 and start an eleven-month transition period. As one of the EU 28, Austria held the rotating presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2018, during which the withdrawal agreement between the UK and the EU was finalized. The Austrian governments between 2016 and 2019 regretted the outcome of the referendum and the UK leaving the European Union and supported averting a no-deal Brexit (Reuters, 2019). Despite demands for an EU referendum in Austria from the right-wing and traditionally Eurosceptic party FPÖ shortly after the Brexit referendum (Der Standard, 2016), these demands eventually ebbed away. The Austrian mainstream media – both liberal and conservative – are primarily pro-EU and reported extensively on the negative and critical impact the vote might have on the EU in general and on Austria specifically. A discourse marked by *schadenfreude* could also be observed in the more conservative press (Krzyżanowski, 2019, p. 488).

In Britain, on the original Brexit date, the House of Commons (HoC) was engaged in one of several debates and the third vote on the withdrawal agreement negotiated by Prime Minister Theresa May. The various parliamentary Brexit debates attracted considerable interest within and outside of the UK and were also broadcast in Austria, as a live video stream with live text commentary by both journalists and readers on the online site of the newspaper Der Standard. This paper analyses the debate on that pivotal day of 29 March 2019 to see how the Brexit process was recontextualized by posters in the live text commentary. Two dominant features of the commentary are humour and commenters' emotional reactions, so it is these two that we will focus on. In descriptive terms, the study is guided by the question as to how commenters convey humour and emotion in reaction to a livestream of, and live reporting on, the third HoC debate and vote on the Brexit withdrawal agreement. We are further interested in what functions humour and emotions have in dealing with Brexit as a political process. In addition, we address what the use of humour and emotion in the live text commentary tells us about readers' perception of parliamentary Brexit debates in the UK.

In the next section we provide an overview of humour and emotion in the online sphere, before introducing the new activity type that is live text commentary. Following that, we describe our specific data set and the methods of analysis. Section 5 of the paper details our findings, enabling us to answer our research questions in the subsequent conclusion, and outlines our contributions along with pointing out possible venues for further research. First, however, we will turn to the two focal points of interest in this paper, humour and emotion.

2. Humour and Emotion in the Online Sphere

In this section, we will review prominent theories of humour and emotion as they manifest and are negotiated in discourse. Our particular focus will be on previous work on humorous and emotional interaction in online spaces. In addition, we will briefly discuss the links between humour and emotion.

Studies on humour usually identify the phenomenon by analysing the linguistic features used to convey humour, such as verbal repetition, figures of

speech like metaphors, similes, metonymy, idioms and proverbs, as well as wordplay, rhyme and alliteration (Carter & McCarthy, 2004; Jaworski, 2016). Importantly, researchers call for not only identifying linguistic features but also for analysing the function and purpose of humour in discourse (Schnurr, 2010; Vasquez, 2019).

Early studies on humour focused on laughter as a prototypical humour marker. Despite humour and laughter having a close relationship, they are not inseparable nor does laughter necessarily hint at the presence of humour (Glenn & Holt, 2017; Schnurr, 2010). Therefore, research has moved on to analysing ways of responding to humour and identifying functions of humour. With regard to the former, answering with more humour, repeating the humorous remark, (dis)agreement and of course laughter have all been identified as ways to react to humour in discourse, as have non-verbal features including facial expressions (Hay, 2001; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006; Schnurr & Chan, 2011). Importantly, Schnurr and Plester (2017, p. 310) remind us that '[t]he choice of response strategy depends on the situational context (including the relationship among interlocutors) and the type of humor used'.

Studies on the function of humour primarily focus on oral face-to-face interactions in various contexts (e.g. Davies, 2015; Dynel, 2012; Everts, 2003; Glenn & Holt, 2017; Holmes, 2000; Wang, 2014) and less on online contexts (but see Locher & Bolander, 2015; Mak & Chui, 2013). Weitz (2016, p. 1) states that the 'principles of humour production remain the same in online places, but the technologies we use shape the ways we joke'. Much of the early work on humour in computer-mediated communication therefore focused on the use of emoticons and markers of humour (Baym, 1995; Danet et al., 1997; Hancock, 2004; Herring, 1999). However, Hübler and Bell (2003) looked at extended co-construction of humour on a mailing list, demonstrating how members extend and incorporate humour in their messages and thereby create a text-based community. More recent studies about online humour have moved beyond classic forms of computer-mediated communication such as mailing lists but address, for example, the function of humour and jokes for community-building in social media (Marone, 2015; Mullan, 2020; Odebunmi & Ajiboye, 2016) and humour and intertextuality in internet memes (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).

Focusing on the functions of humour for community building in online contexts, Marone (2015) points out that humour achieves a set of social goals such as alleviating negative comments, facilitating collaboration, and supporting and attracting new participants. Mullan (2020) identifies similar functions of spontaneous humour and its contribution to members' sense of belonging to a group. In this context, Demjén (2018) raises an interesting point: most research on how humour and in-group meanings develop in a community draws upon data that consist of a 'snippet of interaction' (Demjén, 2018, p. 94). In her research, she instead analyses how a running joke in an online community came into being and developed and changed meaning over a period of time. By contrast, our dataset is only one of a series of live text commentaries where people would meet almost daily to watch the HoC debates in early 2019. Despite being such a 'snippet of interaction', albeit one that stretches over nine hours, it is part of a set of data where humour and in-group meanings as well as group solidarity develop over time among a core group of people.

Moving on to the second focus of this paper, emotions have been defined as ‘neurophysiological processes emerging from our perception of an event, situation or entity as relevant, beneficial or harmful to our goals, needs and values’ (Benítez-Castro & Hidalgo-Tenorio, 2019, p. 316).

There is a vast body of literature on language and emotion that spans various sub-disciplines within linguistics (for overviews, see Bednarek, 2008, pp. 7-10; Schwarz-Friesel, 2013, pp. 12-15). However, most scholars distinguish between language on emotions on the one hand and emotional language on the other. For example, Foolen (2012, p. 350) argues that ‘language has both a direct and an indirect link to emotion [i.e.] language reflects conceptualization of emotion and expresses emotion’. The example he gives is of a speaker either claiming that a certain food is ‘disgusting’ or using interjections like ‘ugh’ or ‘yuk’ to encode their disgust. Elsewhere, this distinction is referred to as expression and thematization as two forms of manifesting emotions in language (Fiehler, 2002, pp. 86-88) or as displaying vs describing emotions (Langlotz & Locher, 2012). Adopting a systemic-functional approach, Bednarek (2008, pp. 11-12) likewise differentiates language that denotes affect from language that signals affect: whereas the former involves explicit reference to emotion (e.g. ‘She was annoyed’) or to behaviour caused by an emotion (e.g. ‘She snapped at him’; see Ungerer, 1997, p. 309), signalling affect involves indicating that someone is experiencing an emotion without naming it (e.g. “‘For God’s sake, leave me alone”, she said’).¹

Comparing examples such as ‘She was annoyed’ and ‘He was fuming with rage’ demonstrates that direct reference to emotion and behaviours caused by it can be literal or metaphoric (see e.g. Kövecses, 2003) and be realized in various word classes. Language expressing someone’s emotional state takes a similarly wide variety of forms, e.g. expletives or prosodic features. In written language, ‘visual intensification’ (Langlotz & Locher, 2012, p. 1600), e.g. punctuation or capitalization, as well as emoticons can also suggest emotion, and online communication additionally affords the use of emojis, gifs and memes for that purpose (see Danesi, 2019). In the present study, we will analyse both language that expresses feelings and related behaviours as well as language features that explicitly refer to someone’s emotions. We will, however, limit our discussion to the affect experienced by text producers and disregard instances where emotions are ascribed to others.

The analysis of emotion employs the appraisal framework introduced by Martin (2000). Simply put, their framework is divided into a) engagement, i.e. how many different voices are represented in a text and how; b) graduation, or focus and force of the evaluations present in a text; and c) attitude. The latter comprises judgement, typically of people and their actions as well as appreciation, usually of objects and artefacts. The third component is affect, i.e. emotional reactions, both referred to and expressed, by the text producer or ascribed to others. Affect, which is at the centre of the subsequent analysis, has been differentiated from judgement and appreciation as expressing or referring to emotions, while the latter two encode opinions (Bednarek, 2009, p. 167). Emotions and opinions are related in that our emotional reactions will influence our opinions and vice versa; indeed Martin and White (2005, p. 45) refer to judgement and appreciation as ‘institutionalised affect’, while Benítez-Castro and Hidalgo-Tenorio (2019) suggest that the whole attitude part of the appraisal system could be renamed as affect, with the latter split into emotion and opinion. Staying with the original terminology, a distinction can be drawn

between overt and covert affect, with overt affect ascribing emotion to the text producer or someone else (e.g. ‘I am surprised’) and covert affect ascribing a quality to a behaviour, event or entity that triggers an emotional response (e.g. ‘This is surprising’). Seen as such, covert affect ‘might be said to constitute a “bridge” between assessments of opinion and emotion’ (Bednarek, 2009, p. 172).

When it comes to affect in online communication, the general point has been made that ‘writers tend to display emotion very readily online’, indeed that ‘online ... discussion often seems more emotional than a face-to-face [...] discussion’ (Laflen & Fiorenza, 2012, p. 296). It appears that especially informal online spaces, such as Facebook posts or the live text commentary we analyse below, ‘favour a linguistic style which can index a high degree of involvement and affectivity’ (Giaxoglou, 2014, p. 166). While any linguistic analysis of emotion can only ever address the expression of, or reference to, an emotion rather than the direct experience of it, this is aggravated in written online communication, because the latter does not provide additional cues such as facial expression, gesture, body language or physiological effects like blushing. Accordingly, Langlotz and Locher (2012, p. 1604) point out that in written online comments, ‘language-based signaling becomes the most important tool ... for displaying emotions’. Although there are only few studies to date that look at appraisal in online interaction (e.g. He, 2019), analysing the linguistic expression of judgement, appreciation and especially affect is a powerful method to document and understand how readers react to, and interact around, online news.

The above discussion of humour and emotion implies that there is a link between the two. This connection is perhaps clearest when we consider the function of humour to amuse and entertain, which can be linked to the top-level category of satisfaction in the appraisal framework. However, as Schnurr & Plester (2017, p. 310) point out, humour is not always supportive in that it ‘create[s] solidarity and group harmony, [but] many of the motivations behind humor contain elements of superiority, aggression and ridicule of others’. This latter, contestive function of humour (Holmes & Marra, 2002) ties in with ridicule, which is a prominent sub-category of affect in our data.

Before we introduce those data, it is worth providing some background on the activity type that is the focus of this paper.

3. Live Text Commentary: A New Activity Type

Research on online commentary to date has dealt with below-the-line comments on news articles (see Ziegele et al., 2018 for an overview), including on the topic of Brexit (Meredith & Richardson, 2019), and in the few studies that address live commentary online, the focus is on journalists’ language production (e.g. Chovanec, 2012b). We further develop such earlier work by discussing a new and remarkably hybrid and complex activity type. Our data are taken from the website of the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard* and comprise a live-streamed video, live coverage embedding tweets, images and other videos, and comment threads by readers. Live text commentaries are hosted regularly on the website, for occasions ranging from football matches to press briefings and parliamentary debates, and attract a varying number of readers, with a core group forming a community of practice (see below). The

negotiations about the EU withdrawal agreement in the British HoC during 2019 became the topic of almost weekly – at one point daily – live text commentaries.

The organization behind our data site, the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*, was founded in 1988 and is published daily from Monday to Saturday, reaching 498,000 readers in the course of a week (Der Standard, 2020). The leftist-liberal broadsheet was the first German-language newspaper to go online, in 1995 (Stimeder, 2008, p. 48), and its website is accessed by just over 2.5 million unique users within Austria – a country of 8 million people – every month (Der Standard, 2020). The newspaper has a pro-European stance and in the wake of the UK Brexit referendum focussed on UK-internal dimensions, such as the UK constitutional and democratic crisis possibly resulting in ‘the fall of the UK with, inter alia, Scottish independence or reunification of Ireland’ (Krzyżanowski, 2019, p. 476). Further topics in its reporting were what journalists perceived to be the wrong and flawed ideas that made ‘Brexit thinking’ possible, Brexit as a potential economic and political disaster, and right-wing populism and Euroscepticism as being responsible for the crisis in European integration (Krzyżanowski, 2019, p. 477).

The newspaper’s online version (derstandard.at) has evolved not only due to improvements in website technology but, above all, due to active community management via various fora and live text commentaries on political and sport events. In 2020, 70,000 people actively posted comments to the website and live text commentaries, an increase of almost 25% compared to 2019 (Der Standard, 2021).² *Der Standard* is not the only Austrian newspaper though to host a website: the conservative tabloid *Kronenzeitung* likewise has an online version where readers can join discussion boards. Given the newspaper’s political stance, however, the focus and content of the discussions on krone.at is more right-wing than in the derstandard.at community. Web-based journalism, on derstandard.at and elsewhere, has changed in that it no longer merely informs readers but also entertains them and enables their direct participation (see Chovanec, 2012a, p. 140). Chovanec (2012a, p. 140) further highlights that the medium of production in online journalism is written language, yet live text commentary displays ‘conceptual orality’ (Janich, 2017, p. 44). By incorporating typical features of spoken language, live text commentary by journalists can be compared to live spoken commentary on the radio, with readers’ comments similar to formerly private comments made by the audience of a broadcast.

Figure 1 shows a screenshot of a video live stream with live text commentary on derstandard.at.

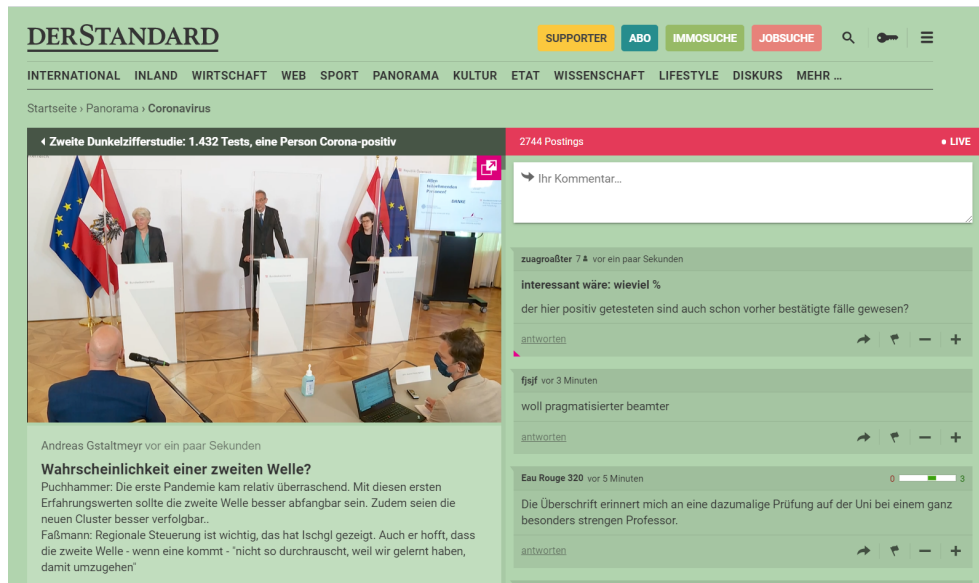


Figure 1. Video stream with journalists' reporting and readers' live text commentary on *derstandard.at*

Live text commentary is a relatively new activity type in online journalism. Activity types have been defined as 'contextualised bundle[s] of communicative actions' (Culpeper et al., 2008, p. 300) and, as detailed by Levinson (1979/1992), can be analysed for their settings, participants, goals, norms, structure, speech acts and register. The setting for our data is online and participants are the journalists and readers/commenters, who contribute within the constraints of a particular structure: journalists report successive developments in the live-streamed event in question, adding independent posts in real time ('live'), while readers can post their comments pertaining to either the video stream or journalists' posts and also reply to other readers' comments. These comments are a 'specific type of interpersonal public online communication' (Ziegele et al., 2018, p. 317) between the readers and the journalist, as well as among readers. The live text commentary by the readers is characterized by a variety of speech acts and registers, whereas the journalists' postings employ mostly representative speech acts of describing and explaining events, and make use of a standard register. This difference between the two participant groups also extends to their respective goals for the activity type, i.e. the journalists mostly appear to wish to inform their readers, while the latter mainly seem to seek entertainment.

Readers engaging in *Der Standard* live text commentaries join a group of contributors who have established their own norms and practices. This can be seen in the use of in-group terms (e.g. [Dear live text commentary participants] '*Liebe Tickeranten und Tickerantinnen*'), reference to live text commentary-related activities ([Getting some grub and buying wine and soda on my way home has become a bit of a habit with Brexit live commentaries] '*mampfen gehen, und aufm heimweg spritzwein besorgen – hat sich bei brexit tickern bissl eingebürgert*'), sign-offs ([See you at the next live text commentary!] '*Bis zum nächsten Ticker!*') and even offline community meetings (Der Standard, 2019). Thus, participants in these live text commentaries can be regarded as a community of practice in that they show

regular, mutual engagement in the activity type, take part in the joint negotiated enterprise of online entertainment and use a shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). One such shared repertoire is humour and how it is used in the community of practice (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p. 1685). Norrick (2003, p. 1342) points to joking and its effect on group cohesion, and to how joking ‘serves as a control on what sorts of talk and behaviour are acceptable to participants in the interaction’. Another resource is the expression of commenters’ emotional reactions and the bonds that are formed through it.

In the next section, we will elaborate on how we analysed humour and emotion in our data.

4. Data and Methodology

For this paper, we investigate reader comments on the Austrian news platform *standard.at* which were posted during the live coverage of the HoC debate and third vote on the withdrawal agreement on 29 March 2019.³ Nine hours of coverage (from 07:45 to 16:42) comprise 91 postings by four different journalists on the live streamed debate, triggering 2,786 reader comments totalling 35,863 words. Probably in reaction to the live stream being in English, 263 (10 %) of the comments were either partly or fully written in that language. The number of both comments and commenters peaks around the time of the vote (ca. 14:45), as shown in Figure 2.

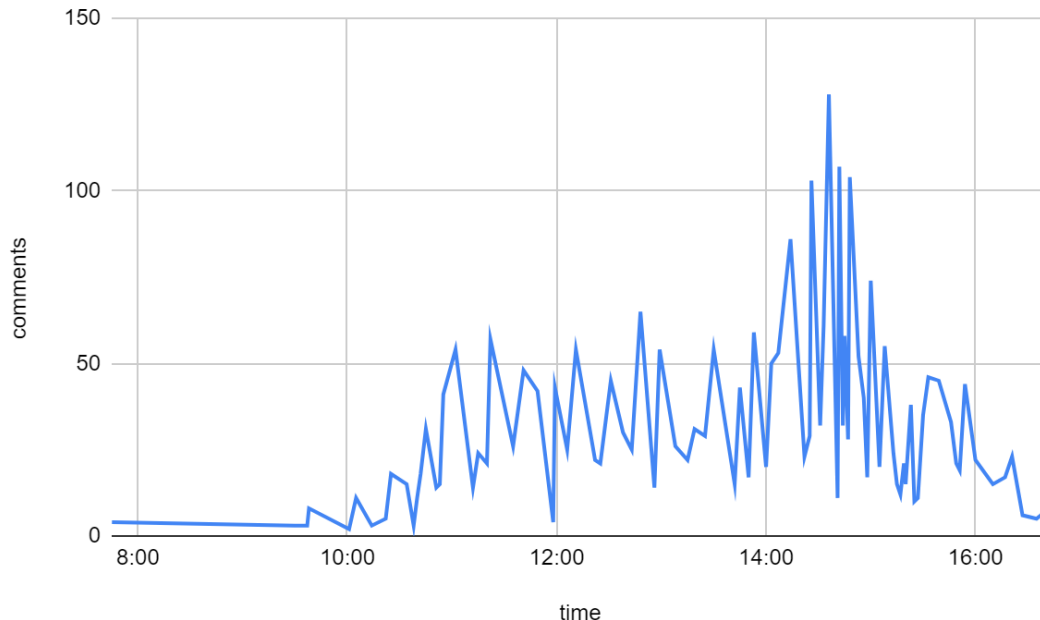


Figure 2. Number of reader comments over the course of the live text commentary

In total, readers posted comments under 445 different user names and while 60.45% commented at least twice, 35.71% of comments were made by only 4.94% of commenters.⁴ The high number of contributors made it impractical to seek individual permission to reproduce the data. Moreover, when providing screenshots of the data, we decided not to anonymize the

commenters' usernames, as those that we show are pseudonyms and the unedited live text commentary is available on a public, freely accessible website. While commenters may have perceived the ongoing commentary as a private interaction, we can reasonably assume that they were aware of the public nature of the live stream and commentary. Where we quote from the data, original spellings and grammar were retained and text that is English in the original has been indicated by bold.

We began our analysis with a close reading of the entire data set, coding it for instances of humour as well as readers' expressions of their emotional response to both the live stream and journalists' posts. We followed up on this with a qualitative analysis of the data that draws on linguistic frameworks of online humour (Weitz, 2017), functional discourse analysis of humour (Schnurr & Plester, 2017) as well as appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005).

Weitz (2017) highlights several core issues of humour in the online sphere, of which joking, wordplay and punning are most relevant to our study. Despite online humour transactions being 'skeletal consistent with face-to-face joking' (Weitz, 2017, p. 507), they are primarily expressed in written form. While this allows people time to think about how best to phrase their humorous remarks, this time becomes rather short in often fast-paced live text commentary. In this context, humour serves as a crucial aspect of one's performance in the online sphere (Weitz, 2017, p. 507). Weitz takes a conversation analytical approach, stating that humorous conversation threads may consist of adjacency pairs with a first-pair part and any number of second-pair parts. Such conversation threads disclose collaborative humour in which punning and wordplay have a central role and require background knowledge for the participants to grasp meanings (Weitz, 2017, p. 513). If the wordplay is on the phonological level, spelling knowledge is also a prerequisite for understanding the humorous remark. This is even more relevant for wordplay across languages and language varieties, which in our study involves English and German as well as Austrian dialects.

While in spoken interaction humour may be identified by laughter or prosodic features, in written interaction other features need to be drawn upon, such as emoticons and emoji, chat-specific abbreviations, meta-comments and textual responses (Schnurr & Plester 2017, p. 314). These features reveal pragmatic meaning which further indicates humorous intent. Our analysis focuses on such humour markers in online communication and also draws on functional discourse analysis of humour. This approach in humour studies emphasizes both affiliative aspects of humour and laughter, such as building in-group solidarity, and disaffiliative aspects of humour, such as aggression, ridicule and superiority (Attardo, 2015; Schnurr & Plester, 2017). Humour is regarded as an interactive category, in that a humorous remark is interpreted as such and instigates further humorous remarks. While our analysis is mainly concerned with positive aspects of humour, the analysis of emotion will demonstrate the links between contestive humour on the one hand and ridicule and amusement on the other. Another link between humorous and emotion talk is the use of intensification, e.g. through graphic means (see the multiple exclamation and question marks, respectively, in example 6 and figure 5).

The analysis of readers' emotional responses employs parts of the appraisal framework first proposed by Martin and White (2005; see also Martin, 2000; White, 2015) and outlined in section 2 above. The data were coded for

authorial affect, covering both covert affect, which ascribes an emotion-triggering quality to someone or something, and overt affect, i.e. ascribing a feeling to oneself or someone else. More specifically, we focused on readers' emotional reactions to the debate they were watching on the live stream and to journalists' posts. Given the links between humour and emotion, we were mainly interested in the affect element of appraisal, while indicating points at which it overlaps and combines with judgement of Members of Parliament (MPs).

According to Martin and White's (2005) framework, the top-level categories within affect are polar in nature, comprising (dis)inclination, (un)happiness, (in)security and (dis)satisfaction. It needs to be borne in mind though that these are realised on a continuum (Martin & White, 2005, p. 48): for example, expressions of fear as a form of disinclination can range from 'wary' to 'terrified'. While our identification of top-level affect categories was theory-driven, following the appraisal taxonomy, we used a data-driven approach to identifying different subcategories. For example, the often contradictory nature of the Brexit debate can result in commenters' confusion, which we labelled as a sub-category of insecurity. In addition, our dual focus on humour and emotion made it necessary to differentiate between more kinds of humour than the 'cheer' that Martin and White (2005, p. 78) postulate as a subcategory of happiness. Finally, we adapt Martin and White's (2005) framework in that we categorize affection and antipathy as forms of (dis)inclination, rather than (un)happiness, as the latter seemed counter-intuitive (see also Benítez-Castro & Hidalgo-Tenorio, 2019, pp. 312-313).⁵ Table 1 provides an overview of the top-level categories we adopted from appraisal theory and the subcategories we identified in our data, along with examples from the live commentary.

(DIS)INCLINATION	
DISINCLINATION	INCLINATION
ridicule [I'll go to the pub and <u>laugh</u> at the Brits there.]	affection [Finally my <u>favourite</u> from Scotland!]
antipathy [The DUP <u>makes me sick</u> .]	hope [Oh how I <u>hope</u> that the vote will be negative again.]
schadenfreude [Bye bye Great Britain, <u>have fun with your hard Brexit</u> .]	sympathy [I do feel a bit <u>sorry for her</u> .. :)]
wariness [Will the population learn from this? I'm <u>afraid</u> not...]	
no regret [My <u>pain</u> at seeing them go is getting <u>severely restricted</u> .]	

no sympathy [My <u>sympathy</u> is <u>very much limited</u> .]	
(DIS)SATISFACTION	
DISSATISFACTION	SATISFACTION
weariness [I can't tell you how <u>fed up</u> I am with the topic.]	pleasure [Another vote on whatever tomorrow. This is just so <u>entertaining</u> .]
anger [I'm still <u>mad</u> that there will be an extension until mid-April.]	amusement [<u>XD</u> you couldn't make it up]
boredom [Hours of Boredom. Minutes of Excitement.]	excitement [I'm about to <u>burst</u> .]
(IN)SECURITY	
INSECURITY	SECURITY
disbelief [It's <u>incredible</u> how arrogant these snobs are.]	confidence [The DUP will <u>certainly</u> not cave in.]
confusion [To be honest, I really <u>can't see through</u> this anymore.]	
surprise [Now that's really <u>surprising</u> .]	
(UN)HAPPINESS	
UNHAPPINESS	HAPPINESS
regret [<u>Shame</u> about the extension]	relief [I'm <u>glad</u> that there's still a chance for Remain then.]
sadness [The <u>sad</u> thing is that there won't be millions for the health system.]	joy [Withdrawal agreement clearly rejected again. <u>Good news</u>]
disappointment [Corbyn is a bitter <u>disappointment</u> .]	

Table 1. Affect categories and examples from the data (English translations)

The underlined parts in the examples in Table 1 show the appraising items, i.e. those words, phrases, clauses, punctuation marks or emoticons that encode the emotion in question. While one appraising item is limited to one type of affect only, the data do feature different emotions within one

comment. For instance, example (1) juxtaposes ridicule and sadness (see also example 12):

- (1) *Ich nehme das alles nicht mehr ernst sondern lache nur mehr drüber.
Traurig eigentlich, aber was solls.*
[I don't take any of this seriously anymore but just laugh about it. Sad
actually, but what can you do.]

Having introduced our considerations on data selection, collection and analysis, we will now show the forms and functions that humour and emotions take in the live text commentary under investigation.

5. Analysis of Humour and Emotion in the Live Text Commentary

In this section we will first show the different strategies that commenters use to convey humour and will elaborate on its function. In the second subsection, we will provide results about the affect categories in the data and discuss the most prominent ones.

5.1 Humour

In the live text commentary on the HoC debate on the withdrawal agreement, humour occurs frequently throughout the nine hours and peaks around the vote. Three forms of humour dominate the commentary, namely word play and intertextuality, metaphors and similes, and parody. Word play and intertextuality account for almost half (49.63%) of these three types, with metaphor and simile making up under a third (29.63%) and instances of parody amounting to just over a fifth (20.74 %). Some examples realize more than one type of humour at the same time, such as this combination of an intertextual reference to Austrian writer Helmut Qualtinger with a football metaphor: [Scotland v England: Simmering v Kapfenberg a piece of cake] *'Schottland gegen England Simmering gegen Kapfenberg a lercher!'*

While instances of humour can be met with written laughter, laughter is not necessarily an indicator of perceiving an utterance as humorous (Glenn & Holt, 2017). In online environments 'the choral surge of group laughter is missing' (Weitz, 2017, p. 506), and indeed laughter as a reaction to a humorous utterance occurs quite seldom in our data. A humorous utterance without a reaction or acknowledgment may be regarded as 'failed humour' (Bell, 2009) and not displaying amusement, when accompanied by a rejection of something as not funny, could be considered 'unlaughter' (Billig, 2005, p. 175-199), particularly in face-to-face interactions. Yet Vandergriff and Fuchs (2012) note that silence as a response to a humour token is not the same in online interaction, where it could be due to overlapping turns, a new posting by a journalist, or because 'stand-alone' or individual humour (Holmes & Marra, 2002) is the norm in a community of practice.

Thus, while contributors may indeed be laughing, chuckling or grinning in front of their electronic devices as a reaction to a humorous remark, they may not transfer these spontaneous reactions to the live text commentary. Those who do express 'e-laughter' (Larson, 2015) do so by verbalising laughter

(‘HAHA’, ‘Wahahahaha’) or by using abbreviations specific to written online communication (‘lol’), emoticons (‘:-)’), meta-comments ([because I am laughing so hard I’m crying] ‘*weil mir vor so viel lachen die Augen tränen*’) or explicitly remarking that the other person’s contribution is humorous ([great sense of humour] ‘*Guter Humor*’).

By being humorous, commenters show that they are able to play along and thus belong to the in-group. This is particularly noticeable in our data set when humorous remarks produce more humour, a phenomenon that has been described as ‘thread[s] constitutive laughter’, i.e. ‘a collaborative process of perpetuating humor through a series of messages’ (Hübler & Bell, 2003, p. 280). The commenters enact various linguistic ways to express both collaborative and individual humour, of which wordplay, similes and metaphors, and parody are the ones we are going to present in this analysis.

The most common strategy is wordplay, in particular playing with sounds (Knospe, 2016), either within the English language or across language boundaries (i.e. paronymy). This dominance of wordplay is unsurprising, given that in the text-based live commentary, ‘discourse encompasses the entirety of [the] group’s online interactions and experiences’ (Hübler & Bell, 2003, p. 281). One such popular wordplay is Speaker Bercow’s call to ‘order’, changed by many commenters to the dialect word ‘Oida’ (i.e. ‘Alter’ [mate]), which can be used as a noun or interjection for expressing surprise, anger, frustration, etc.

- (2) *Und schreit berkow schon wieder OIDA!! ?*
OIDA OIDA!
ORDER, OIDA... MIA SAN IM O++++++!
 [And is Bercow shouting OIDA again?
 OIDA OIDA!
 ORDER, OIDA... WE ARE F++++++!]

Other forms of English/German wordplay are based on near-homophones, e.g. when changing the pronunciation of English names into Austrian pronunciations. In that way, the name of Conservative MP and prominent Brexit supporter Jacob Rees-Mogg turns into ‘*Jakob mog Reis*’ [Jacob likes rice]. Wordplay around homophones within English also occur, e.g. ‘the eyes to the left, the nose to the right’ (instead of ‘the ayes to the left, the noes to the right’ to declare the outcome of a vote)⁶ or ‘*she’s a Mayniac*’, which quotes a song title to make a judgement on Prime Minister May.

Another humour strategy is to comment on the HoC debate itself by using similes and metaphors. In doing so, commenters move beyond politics and make reference to other forms of entertainment, most often to sports events.

- (3) Brexit ist wie Cricket. Außer auf der Insel weiß keiner was das soll, die Regeln sind ein Wahnsinn und ein Spiel kann Ewigkeiten dauern
 [Brexit is like cricket. No one except those on the island see the point, the rules are crazy and a match can last forever.]
- (4) *Das läuft wohl auf ein Elferschießen hinaus...*
Ja aber UK schießt aufs eigene Tor
und wir alle wissen, wies England da normalerweise geht
Das ewige Tor(y)mann-Dilemma...
 [It looks like there will be a penalty shootout...
 Yes, but the UK shoots on their own goal]

and we all know how England usually does in penalty shootouts
The eternal dilemma of the goalkeeper...]⁷

The difficult process of the vote and of getting MPs to accept the withdrawal agreement is here constructed as a football match that has to be decided by a penalty shootout. The less than successful performance of the English national team in penalty shootouts at world cups is regularly referenced when it comes to the difficult vote for/against the withdrawal agreement. Elsewhere, we find references to Austrian football players and managers as well as famous matches that football fans in Austria are familiar with. Moving from sports to cinematic entertainment, the HoC debates and the Brexit process are constructed as a TV series ([episode 235 of the series “**Britain’s not an empire anymore and how to deal with it**”] *‘folge 235 der serie “britain’s not an empire anymore and how to deal with it”*) and commenters regularly discuss which actors could play the politicians in a hypothetical series on Brexit:

- (5) *Für die TV-Fans wäre es besser, die Folgen immer zur gleichen Zeit auszustrahlen. Vielleicht könnte man das mal in Westminster deponieren. Da die Staffel am 12. April endet: ist eine Fortsetzung geplant? Und wer wird die hauptrolle des/der PM übernehmen?*
[For TV fans it would be better to broadcast the episodes at a set time. Maybe this could be raised with Westminster. As this season ends on 12 April: are there plans for a sequel? And who is going to play the lead character of the Prime Minister?]

A final way of enacting humour is parody, in particular, mimicking parliamentary language. Commenters integrate parliamentary language into their comments, which are either in English or combine German and English. Such parody for example occurs at the beginning of the live text commentary when commenters greet each other.

- (6) Handkuss die RIGHT HONORABLE LADIES ... Kopfnuss die Honorable Gentlemen! Schön mit euch live dabei zu sein ...;O
[My compliments to the **RIGHT HONORABLE LADIES** ... a knuckle rap on the head for the **honorable gentlemen!** Nice to be here with you ;O]

Parliamentary language is also drawn upon when disagreement among commenters occurs in the live text commentary (known as a ‘ticker’ in German):

- (7) **I believe I can detect a DIVSIOOOOOOON!!!!!!!!!! CLEAR THE TICKER!;**)

Here the commenter is imitating Speaker Bercow, using capitals and repeating letters and punctuation marks to ‘shout’ out to their fellow commenters (see Hentschel, 1998), thus trying to ease the situation in a humorous manner.

These humorous remarks instigate co-construction of humour and are a sign of in-group solidarity (Schnurr & Plester, 2017, p. 312). Research on humour in online contexts has identified creating solidarity as the most important humour function (Zappavigna, 2012, pp. 155-157) and we would

like to highlight three additional ways in which in-group solidarity is established: intertextuality, mutual activities and joint fantasising.

Intertextuality, especially alluding to forms of popular culture such as films and TV series, is prevalent in the live text commentary. This can take the form of the HoC debate being compared to a specific series, e.g. Game of Thrones, or commenters quoting, or adapting, famous lines from a film:

(8) *Ich erwarte jetzt das die Queen zum imperialien Marsch einmarschiert, irgendwen köpft, und schreit "This. Is. Britain", den Kopf auf den Tisch knallen lässt und geht.*

[I am now expecting the Queen to march into the House of Commons accompanied by the imperial march, behead someone and shout "**This. Is. Britain**", slam the head onto the table and leave.]

Humour often serves as a 'connective device' (Yus, 2018, p. 295), making those who engage in it feel part of an in-group. In our data, humour is co-constructed by highlighting the entertaining character of the HoC debate and the readers' experience of watching and commenting on it. For example, commenters talk about their mutual activity of watching the live stream and communicating via the live text commentary as being in a pub and ordering drinks:

(9) *so, jz is scho wurscht, wer wead noch a Bier?*

hier HIeR

HIER

hier hier

hier

HIER

....

Orderrrrrr!

[Right, it doesn't matter anymore, who would like another beer?

I do I DO

I DO

I do I do

I do

I DO

....

Orderrrrrrr!]

In order to stay entertained in dull moments, or as 'time fillers' (Chovanec, 2012a, p. 142), commenters also refer to songs, quoting lines from football chants, common drinking games and birthday songs.

(10) **We wish you a happy Brexit, we wish you a happy Brexit, we wish you a happy Brexit, and a happy downfall!**

Example (10) exemplifies contestive humour linked to the feeling of schadenfreude.

Another strategy to co-create humour and build in-group solidarity is to create hypothetical small stories, or joint fantasising (Kotthoff, 2007, p. 278), which is the emergent production of a shared fantasy, often with several conversational participants making short contributions which create coherent scenes through the incremental structuring and augmentation of unreality.

Commenters do so by blending MPs with public figures from other contexts, thus forming a collaborative fantasy (Norrick, 2000) or telling fantasy narrative (Partington, 2006). One such example is of the then Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz paying a visit to the HoC, with two commenters co-creating a story:

- (11)A: *Ich finde Kurz sollte ins House of Commons und sich von Berko mal eine rhetorische Abreibung holen ORDEEEER, no I do not need a lot of hot air from Mr. Kurz, my hair seems perfectly in order to me :)*
 B: *Kurz vs. Blackford würde ich gern man sehen*
 A: *Firstens, Secondly, Thirdly klassische Kurz Rhetorik*
 Blackford: *Scotland will not be dragged out of the EU against its will !*
 Kurz: *Jo eh ned, die EU does a lot of goldplating*
 Blackford: *seems there is a country in Europa with a worse PM than we have*
 [A: I think Kurz should go into the House of Commons and get a rhetorical beating from Bercow: **ORDEEEER, no I do not need a lot of hot air from Mr. Kurz, my hair seems perfectly in order to me :-)**
 B: Kurz vs. Blackford would be something I would really like to see
 A: **Firstens, Secondly, Thirdly**, classic Kurz rhetoric
 Blackford: **Scotland will not be dragged out of the EU against its will!**
 Kurz: No, obviously it won't be, the EU **does a lot of goldplating.**
 Blackford: **seems there is a country in Europe with a worse PM than we have]**

The commenters discursively create an unreal situation by mimicking parliamentary language, using code-switching and referring to Chancellor Kurz' rhetoric. Voicing criticism and expressing anger or frustration by ridiculing Chancellor Kurz in a humorous way shows that humour and emotions are indeed closely related. Ridicule and other emotions voiced by the commenters are the focus of the next section.

5.2 Emotion

Employing an adapted version of Martin and White's (2005) appraisal categories for the subsystem of affect (see section 4), the coding started with the four top-level categories of (dis)satisfaction, (dis)inclination, (in)security and (un)happiness. In an inductive process, the particular realizations of these categories in the data helped to identify the subcategories shown in Tables 1 and 2.

(DIS)INCLINATION (62/38%)	
DISINCLINATION	INCLINATION
ridicule (18/44%)	affection (12/57%)
antipathy (9/22%)	hope (8/38%)
schadenfreude (7/17%)	sympathy (1/5%)
wariness (5/12%)	
no regret (1/2%)	

	no sympathy (1/2%)	
Total	41/66%	21/34%
(DIS)SATISFACTION (50/30%)		
	DISSATISFACTION	SATISFACTION
	weariness (13/59%)	pleasure (10/36%)
	anger (6/27%)	amusement (9/32%)
	boredom (3/14%)	excitement (9/32%)
Total	22/44%	28/56%
(IN)SECURITY (33/20%)		
	INSECURITY	SECURITY
	disbelief (15/58%)	confidence (7/100%)
	confusion (7/27%)	
	surprise (4/15%)	
Total	26/79%	7/21%
(UN)HAPPINESS (20/12%)		
	UNHAPPINESS	HAPPINESS
	regret (9/56%)	relief (3/75%)
	sadness (6/38%)	joy (1/25%)
	disappointment (1/6%)	
Total	16/80%	4/20%
TOTAL	105 (64%)	60 (36%)
165		

Table 2. Affect categories and frequencies in the data

Even a first glance at the rounded percentages in Table 2 shows that negative authorial affect is more prominent than its positive counterpart, corroborating findings from previous studies on online communication about politics (Kleinke, 2008; Laflen & Fiorenza, 2012). This prominence manifests both quantitatively, in higher numbers of instances, as well as qualitatively, in that the top-level categories of negative affect comprise more subcategories than their positive equivalents. In other words, the commenters' reaction to the parliamentary debate and to the related content provided by the journalists is overwhelmingly one of disinclination (particularly ridicule), dissatisfaction (especially weariness), insecurity (mostly disbelief) and, to a far lesser extent, regret. Of these, ridicule is both most frequent and closely

related to humour, so it is worth looking first of all at how this emotion is expressed and how it emerges in interaction.

As a form of reaction to the debate, ridicule is pervasive throughout the live text commentary and also serves to frame the proceedings in the HoC. For example, a reader joins the interaction at 11:14 asking what today's event on *Der Standard's* online site is about. When informed by the journalist that the topic is Brexit, they quip [And I thought it was something serious] (Figure 3).

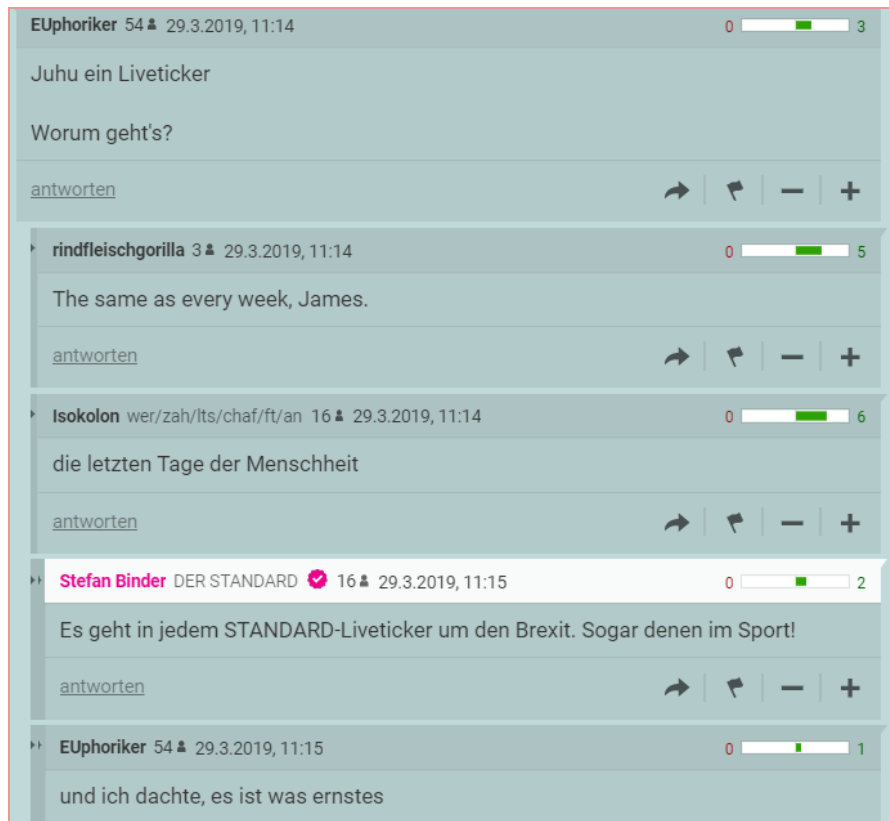


Figure 3. Screenshot 11:14-11:15

The humour enacted by conveying ridicule here is both supportive and contestive, building or reinforcing a connection with other readers but disparaging those involved in the Brexit process.

It is worth noting that the two other commenters in Figure 3 answer the question by employing intertextuality, one by alluding to the popular comedy sketch 'Dinner for One' to characterize Brexit debates as repetitive and predictable, the other by quoting the title of Karl Kraus' novel 'The Last Days of Mankind' to portray them in a more pessimistic light. Ridicule and the related feeling of amusement are similarly mixed with the covert affect of sadness in the following reader comment:

- (12) *Herrliches Kabarett wenns nicht so traurig wär.*
[Fantastic comedy if it wasn't so sad.]

Ridicule is particularly prominent after the results of the vote are announced and it becomes clear that the withdrawal agreement has again been rejected. While some commenters simply react by graphically representing laughter ('HAHAHAHAHHA'), others combine it with a

negative judgement of MPs as incompetent and with directives to go away: [Wahahahaha. Idiots. Bye-bye. Get lost.] ‘*Wahahahaha. Deppen. Tschüss. Schleichts eich.*’. Ridicule is borne out of contempt and as such can be classified as a ‘moral’ emotion that condemns others (Haidt, 2003), so it is not surprising that it co-occurs with negative judgement. We can also see that commenters metonymically extend this ridicule to the British people as a whole:

- (13) *diese britten kann keiner ernstnehmen. die werden, sollte das jemals enden, eine lange zeit einfach nur eine lachnummer sein.*
 [No one can take these Brits seriously. If this should ever end, they will just be a laughing stock for a long time.]

This unmodified statement, which additionally includes an absolute quantifier (‘no one’) and a temporal adverbial (‘a long time’), presents the commenter’s sentiment as a factual truth. As such, it provides evidence for the tarnished image of the UK in this particular community and possibly beyond.

Moving from disinclination to dissatisfaction, commenters are primed for weariness fairly early on in the live stream and text commentary: the second posting by a journalist, at 9:30, plays on the German title of the film ‘Groundhog Day’, again framing Brexit debates in the House of Commons as repetitive and predictable events. One of the commenters reacts to that framing by stating [I am so fed up with the topic, I cannot even tell you ... kick the Brits out] (Figure 4).

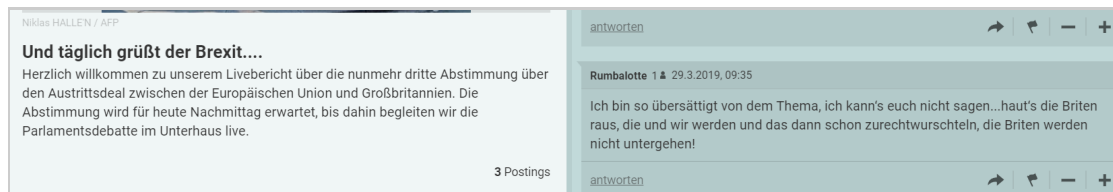


Figure 4. Screenshot 9:35

This confirms that ‘the initial posting to which others respond plays a very important role in ... identifying ... an emotional tenor for the entire thread’ (Laflen & Fiorenza, 2012, p. 303) or, in the case of live text commentary extending over many hours, for interactions among readers.

Looking at the example in figure 4 again, we can observe that the directive for Britain to leave or be removed from the EU is repeated at various points throughout the nine-hour live text commentary. For example, at 11:35, the journalist paraphrases and explains the press briefing by the European Commission. Despite his explanation, however, commenters express confusion about the Commission’s statement. Their query to the journalist is answered by another commenter, who interprets the statement as a diplomatic version of ‘Go play in traffic’ (i.e. get lost). The switch to Viennese dialect (‘*Hauts eich überd Heisa*’) re-keys the propositional content to add affective force (cf. Soukup, 2009, pp. 156-159). Interestingly, the interaction ends with a commenter again quoting the title of the film ‘Groundhog Day’, this time in English.

The frustration manifesting in requests for the UK to either leave or be excluded from the EU is sometimes combined with expressions of weariness. These can take the form of overt affect ascribed to the commenter, as in the

example in Figure 4 [I am so fed up with the topic], but also as covert affect that overlaps with judgements that [the UK is just annoying now'] (*das UK nervt nur noch*). The fact that the UK metonymically stands for the HoC once more shows that the country as a whole is suffering reputational damage.

The third prominent negative emotion or mental state is the commenters' disbelief at the proceedings in the HoC. Such incredulity is expressed in relation to the length and nature of the debate, contributions to the debate by individual MPs and the outcome of the vote. As for the first, the answer to one reader's query about when the vote will take place provokes an expression of affect that is encoded in further questions and in punctuation: [Seriously? They will talk about this for another 3.5 hours???] (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Screenshot 10:57-10:58

Elsewhere, disbelief is combined with negative judgement of MPs as arrogant, stupid or out of touch with reality:

- (14) *Es ist schon unglaublich, wie manche (viele?) im Unterhaus echt glauben, dass sie von der EU über den Tisch gezogen wurden und dass ihnen regelrecht das Messer angesetzt wurde.*⁸

[It is really incredible how some (many?) in the House of Commons seriously believe that the EU pulled a fast one on them and practically held them at knifepoint.]

After the vote, in which a majority of MPs rejected the withdrawal agreement for the third time, expressions of disbelief increase in number but decrease in length (e.g. [You can't be serious] *des kann ned euer ernst sein*) and some commenters merely indicate their physical reaction to the result (e.g. [**shakes head**] **kopfschüttel**).

As with previous forms of negative affect, commenters again extrapolate from MPs to the UK as a whole, e.g. when remarking that [it is hard to believe the stupidity reigning on the island] *Die Dummheit die auf der Insel herrscht ist unglaublich*. Even the least prominent form of negative affect, regret, is mostly directed at the notion of the UK possibly remaining part of rather than leaving the EU. Where regret for Britain leaving is expressed, the sentiment is modified:

- (15) *Ich muss dir (leider) zustimmen, so sehr ich den Austritt bedaure und wünschte es wäre anders – jetzt doch noch in der EU zu verbleiben und diese zu lähmen, wäre noch weitaus schlimmer!*
 [I (unfortunately) have to agree with you, as much as I regret the withdrawal and wish it was different – to remain in the EU now and paralyse it would be much worse!]

Others combine regret that the UK will stay in the EU longer than expected with the frustration discussed above: [Shame about the extension, because at midnight today we would have got rid of those teabags] *‘schade wegen der verlängerung, denn heute mitternacht hätten wir sie los gehabt, die teepackerln’*.

So far, we have seen that ridicule, weariness, disbelief and, to a lesser degree, regret provide corroborative evidence of Britain’s damaged reputation in the community under investigation and possibly beyond. Among those negative forms of affect, some expressions of ridicule in particular construct the HoC debate as a spectacle for the consumption of the commenters – one of them calls it an [idiots’ event] *‘Deppenveranstaltung’* and compares it to the Eurovision song contest, claiming that both are ridiculous in nature. This construction of the debate as spectacle also shows in frequent comments on MPs’ appearance, clothes and accent as well as in some forms of positive affect. It is noteworthy that (dis)satisfaction is the one top-level category that shows more positive than negative emotional reactions, with satisfaction comprising the closely related mental states of pleasure, amusement and excitement.

Pleasure is indicated as covert affect, by referring to the debate as [entertaining] *‘unterhaltsam’* and likening it to events such as a tennis match or football game (see subsection 5.1), to a comedy show ([painful somehow, but super entertaining] *‘Tut zwar irgendwie weh, ist aber super unterhaltsam’*) or, with a relevant cultural slant, to a Monty Python sketch. This spectacle-like nature of the debate is also implied in some expressions of amusement and the related covert affect of excitement. The following example compares watching the parliamentary debate with watching a film (see also previous subsection):

- (16) *Ich werde langsam Kartoffelchips holen. Wird bald spannend...*
 [I will slowly get the crisps. It’s going to get exciting soon...]

While these forms of affect reinforce the low esteem in which participants in the live text commentary hold the HoC, if not the whole country, affection as a subcategory of inclination is mostly used to express actual positive feelings towards a group or individual. However, there are only 12 instances in total, more than half of which are reserved for the leader of the Scottish National Party in Westminster, Ian Blackford. He is repeatedly called [likeable] (*‘sympathisch’*) and readers comment positively on his Scottish accent, comparing it to Austrian accents outside the capital. The latter fact suggests that commenters may perceive a parallel between Scotland and Austria, both of which are small countries sharing a language with a much larger neighbour, or indeed between Scottish people in Westminster and Austrians from various parts of the country who live in Vienna. (One commenter draws an explicit analogy when stating that [the Scots are the Styrians of Great Britain] *‘Die Schotten sind die Steirer Großbritannien(s)’*).⁹

The Speaker of the House is the object of commenters' affection twice, but the British parliament and Britons in general attract affection only once each.¹⁰

To complete the analysis of the most prominent affect categories, confidence is overwhelmingly expressed with regard to the anticipated result of the vote, or individual MPs' and groups' voting behaviour, while three commenters voice their relief when the withdrawal agreement is rejected, leaving open the option for the UK to remain in the EU.

So far, the analysis of emotion has looked at how feelings are expressed and referenced in the data and, to a lesser extent, how affect forms part of interaction. Wetherell (2012, p. 98) has developed the notion of 'affective-discursive practice', which she characterizes as relational, coordinated and intersubjective; an example would be these two commenters agreeing about something they both regret:

(17) A: *Ich dachte bis vor ein paar Jahren noch jeder hätte ein gewisses Interesse daran sich in irgendeiner Form zu informieren. Ist aber leider nicht so, Modetrends und das neueste I-phone sind wichtiger, diese Leute dominieren heutzutage die Wahlen.*

B: *Muß Ihnen leider zustimmen.*

[A: Until a few years ago, I thought that everyone had some interest in staying informed. But unfortunately, that's not the case, fashion trends and the latest i-phone are more important, those people dominate elections these days.

B: Unfortunately, I have to agree with you.]

The two commenters here use the same word ([unfortunately] '*leider*') to express their regret and agree on the undesirable apathy they perceive in voters. They thereby coordinate their interaction and relate to each other as members of an in-group of informed political subjects. On the whole, however, there is very little local interaction around affect in the live text commentary. Instead, relations are realized by similar sentiments being expressed and referenced across the data set, e.g. through various references to the debate being both amusing and sad (e.g. example 12).

We will now conclude the paper by explicitly answering our research questions, discussing what the findings tell us about how commenters convey humour and emotion, how they perceive the Brexit process and what their perception says about parliamentary debates in the UK.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we analysed the way Brexit debates in the British HoC were received by, and enabled interaction between, readers of the Austrian news website *derstandard.at*. In particular, we analysed a live text commentary from 29 March 2019, the day the UK was supposed to, but in fact did not, leave the EU. The news website provided a live stream of the debate and descriptions and explanations in postings by journalists. Readers commented on both the live stream and the journalists' postings.

6.1 Response to Research Questions

This study has sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do commenters convey humour and emotion in reaction to a livestream of, and live reporting on, the third HoC debate and vote on the Brexit withdrawal agreement?
2. What functions do humour and emotions have in dealing with Brexit as a political process?
3. What does the use of humour and emotion in the live text commentary tell us about readers' perception of parliamentary Brexit debates in the UK?

Concerning the first question, commenters use a variety of ways to convey humour. These include wordplay – in particular, sound-based puns and use of phonetic spellings to indicate dialect –, similes and metaphors, and parodies of parliamentary language use along with code-switching. Figurative language use constructs the HoC debate as a form of entertainment, specifically as a TV series and, most prominently, as a sports event. The fact that the community of practice often comes together to comment on live streamed sports matches certainly plays a role here, but the metaphors also suggest the perception of Brexit debates as a spectacle.

At first sight, the dominance of negative authorial affect may contradict the use of humour in the data and commenters do express dissatisfaction, especially weariness, with the Brexit process and the HoC debate. The frequent requests for the UK to leave or be excluded from the EU signal additional frustration. However, the most prominent emotion is in fact ridicule, which can be seen as both a form of disinclination and a type of contestive humour. What is more, the forms of positive affect that are present in the data – amusement, pleasure and excitement – reinforce the humorous construction of the HoC debate as a spectacle to be consumed and enjoyed.

Both humour and emotion serve a relational purpose: although verbalizations of, or references to, laughter are infrequent in the data, humour is often co-constructed, suggesting its function in creating and strengthening in-group solidarity. Such co-constructions take the form of intertextual references, especially alluding to forms of popular culture such as films and TV series, virtual enactment of joint activities such as drinking and singing, as well as joint fantasising about improbable scenarios. Clearly, the community is centred around entertainment, for which the parliamentary debate provides a basis. Similarly, while local affective interaction is sparse in the live text commentary, commenters relate to each other by expressing and referencing the same or similar emotions at various points during the nine-hour commentary.

Moving on to the second question, in the live text commentary we analysed, humour and emotions are ways of trying to comprehend both Brexit and the debate about the withdrawal agreement. Considering the dominance of negative affect, we can conclude that the commenters perceive Brexit as primarily negative and the debate itself as frustrating. Ridicule as the most frequently realized affect hints at the function of humour in this context, i.e. to alleviate frustration by disparaging the actors causing the frustration. Humour and emotions are therefore closely related.

We also looked at what the use and functions of humour and emotion in the live text commentary tell us about the nature of parliamentary debates in the UK and their recontextualization elsewhere. Our analysis suggests that the HoC debate is perceived as a spectacle which is primarily followed for entertainment (or infotainment, if we also consider the journalist's descriptive and explanatory postings, see Filardo-Llamas, this issue). The live text commentary is a debate about that debate, which is watched and commented upon live. Humour is an essential part of this community, as both the debate as well as the live commentary are regarded as amusing and entertaining.

The debate is compared to spectator sports, especially football, and cinematic entertainment. This perception of the debate as a spectacle may be explained by live text commentaries originating in the field of sports before branching out into politics. The theatrical set-up and arcane traditions of the British parliament, such as the gown worn by the Speaker and the third-person reference to other MPs as 'the right honourable friend/lady/gentleman' may also play a part. In the live text commentary, the HoC debate is seen as sharing elements of tension with football matches due to the way it is conducted and because of the vote at the end. The vote adds a sense of unpredictability to the outcome of the debate/match, which accounts for much of its appeal (Bryant & Raney, 2000). What is more, affiliation with a political group/team (here: overwhelmingly with Remain) leads to emotional engagement. As a result, the conceptual relations between competitive sports and adversarial debating facilitate both humour as well as positive and negative affect in the commentary.

At the same time, the presence of negative emotions such as weariness and anger indicate that the commenters have not lost sight of the political nature of the debate and are frustrated with the lack of progress on Brexit and with its divisive and polarising nature. Notably, the contestive humour and negative evaluations that stem from this frustration are extended to the UK as a whole. Our findings therefore illustrate that negative emotions triggered by the Brexit process are not limited to the British public but are also experienced abroad. However, communities in other European countries, being a step removed from the process and impact of Brexit, can perhaps more easily alleviate their frustration and anger through laughter.

6.2 Contributions and Future Research

In this article, we have shown how humour and emotion are expressed in live text commentary, how they intersect and what role they play in building an online community. By looking at a complex new activity type, we hope to have advanced knowledge on how different forms of humour and emotion are realized in online interaction. Our results show that the most prominent forms of humour used in live text commentary are wordplay, metaphor and simile, and parody. While verbalizations of laughter are rare, humour still helps to build in-group solidarity, especially when it is co-constructed and takes the form of joint fantasising. There is less local interaction around emotion, but expressing similar sentiments in the course of the nine-hour live text commentary conveys shared in-group emotions and thereby fosters cohesion. The predominance of negative emotions may be typical of comments on politics, but the frequency of ridicule in particular shows the links between humour and emotion in online interaction.

In live text commentary, commenters react to the live streamed event, the journalists' reports on, and extra materials relating to, it and to each other. The interaction therefore has more layers than below-the-line commentary, making it a challenging but rich data set to analyse. We see the present study as a first foray into understanding how pragmatic meanings and affective states are constructed and conveyed in live group interaction online.

Our study on online humour contributes to other studies applying functional discourse analysis of humour (Schnurr & Plester, 2017). We have also shown how Martin and White's (2005) appraisal framework can be adapted in a data-driven approach and based on particular research questions. While we have taken care to operationalize and make transparent our analytical methods, it is possible that the identification of humour and emotion retains a measure of subjectivity.

Live text commentary as a new activity type provides ample opportunities for further research. It is an interesting and intriguing activity type as no live text commentary fully resembles another, due to the set-up and layout of the news website hosting it. Future research may be feasible on live text commentaries addressing different topics, be it sports or political events. It might also be interesting to analyse how humour and emotions are constructed and if there are differences depending on the topic and on how 'close to home' the event is for the commenters.

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Notes

1. Denoting and signalling emotion can of course be combined, as in the opening to Poe's famous story *The Tell-Tale Heart*: 'True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I have been and am' (Poe, 1843/1998, p. 193). Here, the exclamation, intensifiers, repetition and disfluency all indicate the nervousness that is also referred to explicitly.
2. This increase may be partly due to people having more time to comment while being furloughed during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. The video of the House of Commons debate is available at <https://www.youtube.com/embed/NtA1HFkIbIo> and the official transcript can be found at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-03-29/debates/1EB3876B-BE27-4EBB-9FB5-EEAC71BA8BCE/UnitedKingdom%E2%80%99SWithdrawalFromTheEuropeanUnion> The live text commentary, comprising journalists' posts and reader comments, is archived at <https://www.derstandard.at/jetzt/livebericht/2000100416533/1000150213/britisches-parlament-stimmt-zum-dritten-mal-ueber-brexite-vertrag-ab>
4. We can of course not be sure if one and the same reader posts under different user names – a practice known as 'sock-puppeting' –, so percentages are calculated on the assumption that one user name is linked to only one commenter.
5. For more radical reconfigurations, see Bednarek (2008) as well as Benítez-Castro and Hidalgo-Tenorio (2019).
6. This pun is extended creatively when a commenter declares that [And again, Picasso has won] '*Und wieder hat Picasso gesiegt*'.

7. In German, the commenter uses wordplay by inserting a 'y' into the German equivalent of goalkeeper (Tor(y)mann), thus referring to Conservative MPs.
8. Such beliefs, although phrased differently, were indeed expressed by some MPs in parliamentary debates on Brexit (Koller, 2020).
9. Styrians are from the south-east Austrian state of Styria. The Styrian dialect is a distinctive variety of Austrian German.
10. The remaining instance of affection is reserved for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland, but immediately qualified with a negative judgement: [In a way, I like the DUP guys. Completely bonkers, but no inhibition to show that in public.] *'Die von der DUP sind mir irgendwie sympathisch. Völlig bescheuert, aber sie haben keine Scheu, das öffentlich zu zeigen.'*

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