



Recontextualizing Brexit: Discursive Representations from Outside the UK

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Abstract

In this introduction, we review the previous literature, present mostly in political science, on how Brexit has been perceived, discussed and instrumentalized outside of the UK. We provide an overview of the papers that make up this special issue, pointing out the various media (e.g. news websites, online discussion fora, TV programmes) and discourse domains (politics, banking) that the contributors address, along with the discourse aspects covered by the articles, such as narrative, humour, emotion, blame allocation, framing, and reference and predication. We conclude by highlighting possible future research, especially beyond the national level.

Key words: Brexit, EU, national contexts, transnational sphere

1. Introduction

Like any major, globally relevant event, Brexit has sparked considerable scholarly interest. In the area of linguistics and discourse studies alone, attention has been given to aspects ranging from language policy (e.g. Dunmore, 2020) to word formation (e.g. Lalić-Krstin & Silaški, 2019) and metaphor in discourse (e.g. Musolff, 2017). However, in what is perhaps a

reflection of the inward-looking nature of the Brexit debate in the UK, most research has addressed questions about the language and discourse features of Brexit from a British perspective. It is important though to look beyond the UK, as its withdrawal from the EU has international repercussions, which come with their own discursive constructions. Obviously, some countries are more affected than others by Brexit, starting with Ireland and Spain but broadening out to other EU member states, to the Commonwealth nations and to Britain's trading partners as well as political allies and opponents around the world.

This special issue highlights some of the ways in which Brexit has been recontextualized in discourses outside the UK, addressing media, political, and corporate discourses in Spain, Central Europe, Russia and at a transnational level. Like most endeavours of its kind, work on this collection has not always progressed in a linear fashion: we started out with more papers, including studies of discourses in Ireland, Germany and sub-Saharan Africa. However, the Covid-19 pandemic, work pressures and other factors claimed their victims; we hope to see that research published elsewhere in the future. Family commitments and health issues led to further delays, meaning that this special issue sees the light of day at a time when Britain has left the EU in both nominal and practical terms. Nevertheless, we are proud of what we have achieved in the face of adversity and hope that the papers collected here help with understanding the continuing political, cultural and economic fall-out from Brexit.

2. Previous Work on Brexit, Discourse and Politics

As mentioned above, in recent years, scholars have devoted considerable attention to discourses of Brexit, albeit mostly from a British perspective. Numerous works explore the discursive drivers of the 2016 referendum and its result, analysing the issue from the perspective of a variety of political and other social actors and as conveyed in different media. Many of them investigate the rhetoric and linguistic devices employed by the Leave and/or Remain campaigns (Buckledee, 2018; Freedman, 2020; Parlinton & Zuccato, 2018; Spencer & Oppermann, 2020; Zappettini, 2019a), political parties (Bennett, 2019a; Cap, 2019), leaders (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2018; Wodak, 2018) and institutions (Wenzl, 2019), and by voters (Miglbauer & Koller, 2019; Tolson, 2019). Others focus on traditional and online press coverage of the referendum (Maccaferri, 2019) and treatment of the topic on social media such as Twitter (Zappavigna, 2019) or Facebook (Bossetta et al., 2018).

A sizable body of scholarly literature also deals with the post-referendum discourses of Brexit, examining the discursive consequences that the Leave vote has had. Numerous authors have looked at the media contexts in which Brexit (and, more broadly, UK-EU relations) has been discursively articulated (Henkel, 2018; Lutzky & Kehoe, 2019; Zappettini, 2020), while others home in on the language used by politicians and decision makers (Alexandre-Collier, 2020; Breeze, 2020; Brusenbauch Meislová, 2019a; Demata, 2019; Hansson, 2019), governmental bodies (Zappettini, 2019b), transnational online communities (Kopf, 2019) and private citizens (Bouko & Garcia, 2019; Lalić-Krstin & Silaški, 2019). In this context, it is also the conceptual metaphorization of Brexit that has been studied and thematized (Đurović &

Silaški, 2018; Koller & Ryan, 2019; Musolff, 2017, 2019; Rodet, 2020; Tincheva, 2019a, 2019b, 2020). These different contexts and domains aptly reflect the multilevel, actor-specific discursive and political trajectories that have characterized the process of the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

While not comparable in size, there is now a burgeoning literature on political approaches to Brexit beyond the borders of the UK. Oliver (2018) maps individual member states' attitudes towards the British referendum and the subsequent political process. Thought has further been given of late to the extent of the domestic politicization of Brexit across the EU27, and the causes and agents of that phenomenon (Csehi & Kaniok, 2020; Kaniok & Brusenbauch Meislová, 2020). Implications of Brexit for the bilateral relations between the UK and other EU member states have garnered significant attention from scholars as well, especially when it comes to Ireland (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017; Wright, 2018) and the United Kingdom's erstwhile European partners, such as France (Drake, 2018; Pannier, 2016) or Germany (Ischebeck-Baum, 2017; Paterson, 2018), and, to a limited extent, also other EU countries (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2019b) and/or the United States of America (Marsh, 2018).

Apart from necessarily selective overviews of how Brexit has been received in different EU member states (Durrant et al., 2018; Kassim & Usherwood, 2017; but see Walter, 2020 for an extensive questionnaire study), academic observers of the Brexit process have focused on individual countries outside the UK in depth. Some have explored how national parliamentarians, as key players in shaping Europe's present and future, view and react to the challenge of Brexit (see especially the volume edited by Christiansen & Fromage, 2019 and the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* introduced by Marangoni & Navarro, 2020), with individual case studies addressing Brexit as a topic in parliamentary debates, for instance, in Belgium (Sierens & Brack, 2020), Czechia and Slovakia (Kaniok & Brusenbauch Meislová, 2020).

Looking at national governments, Brusenbauch Meislová and Szent-Iványi (2021) examine how Brexit was framed and exploited by two EU member state governments, Czechia and Hungary. They conceptualize Brexit as a 'distant crisis' for these two countries – although it is likely to have significant impacts, these are neither certain nor immediate. They show that distant crises lead to different framing opportunities for political actors as opposed to the ones generally featured in the crisis framing literature, especially in terms of the incentives to apportion blame on external versus domestic adversaries and the utilization of crisis to call for a change.

The portrayal of Brexit in non-UK media has also come under intense scrutiny. Thus, Adler-Nissen et al. (2017) understand Brexit in performative terms and look at how it has been interpreted primarily in the German media context, operating as a signifier with symbolic value. They show how Brexit functions as a promise for the future and how it is being embedded in pre-existing discourses about the UK, Europe, the nation-state and the global order, thereby helping to produce certain identities and particular pasts. Focusing on the EU rather than Britain, Chaban and Elgström (2019) explore the metaphors applied to the EU in the Russian and Ukrainian press in the first week after the referendum. They find that metaphors in the Russian press demonstrate a view of the EU as weak and fragmented, with an uncertain destination. Similarly, in Ukraine, Brexit is seen from a local perspective, with

metaphors demonstrating a concept of the EU as without vision and travelling on rough seas. Tincheva (2019a) likewise focuses on metaphor when comparing data from UK and non-UK EU media, providing a cognitive linguistic perspective on Brexit, investigating the conceptual metaphors used for it on the first days after the UK referendum and suggesting that there are substantial differences between metaphor source domains in the UK media in contrast to continental EU ones.

In his comparative study that covers four EU member states (Austria, Germany, Poland and Sweden), Krzyżanowski (2019) examines the discourse-conceptual linkages between ‘Brexit’ and ‘crisis’, showing how different representations of crises, both real and imagined, sustain the framing of Brexit by the international press. He finds that, unlike most of the British press, both the liberal and conservative press of these countries represented Brexit as both a current and a future crisis, foregrounding different aspects of its various implications. Finally, Degano and Sicurella (2019) address discourses about populism, with a focus on editorials dealing with the Brexit vote in the British and Italian press. Based on an original framework integrating categories from critical discourse studies, argumentation theory, and the study of heteroglossia/dialogism, the analysis focuses on the ways in which editorialists define and evaluate populism and populists, how they employ argumentative topoi to support their standpoints, and whether and how they engage alternative viewpoints.

Broadening the focus to the EU and its institutions as a whole, Bennett’s (2019b) pre-referendum analysis examines the recontextualization of values in speeches and statements by EU (and UK) representatives. He finds that EU institutional discourse actually played into the hands of British Eurosceptics in legitimizing the UK’s withdrawal. Zooming in on the transnational sphere of interactions between two EU institutions and the wider public, Ruzza and Pejovic (2019) investigate cultural frames that characterized interpretations of Brexit in Facebook posts addressed to the European Commission and the European Parliament right after the referendum. The authors provide a populist and public sphere perspective on Brexit, interpreting it as part of an emerging pan-European populist ideology which pits the elite against the people.

The present collection of studies seeks to contribute to the growing body of discourse studies on how Brexit has been recontextualized outside of the UK. In the next section, we will present the articles in this special issue.

3. Overview of the Contributions

In accordance with previous work, this collection includes studies of media and government discourse in particular countries, such as Spain (Filardo-Llamas, Mármol Queraltó), Czechia and Slovakia (Brusenbauch Meislová), and Russia (Knoblock). In addition, the contributors also investigate recontextualizations of Brexit in the discourse of media consumers (Miglbauer & Koller) and participants in online debates (Kopf). Finally, authors also venture beyond politics to see how Brexit is represented in banking discourse (Aiezza). The individual papers are ordered by how much of an impact Brexit has on a country, with the two papers on Spanish media discourse followed by the articles on Austria, Czechia and Slovakia, and finally Russia. The final two

papers transcend national contexts in favour of transnational discourse on the political and financial consequences of Britain leaving the EU.

Filardo-Llamas' paper focuses on representation of Brexit in Spanish media. Specifically, it examines two information programmes on Spanish TV and sheds light on the differences in their treatment of the UK's decision to leave the EU. Filardo-Llamas finds that both TV programmes highlight the uncertainty the UK's Brexit decision has caused in terms of its social, political and economic impact. Both programmes further link this uncertainty to actions by British politicians, who are negatively evaluated on the two programmes. In addition, to show how Brexit is discussed in a Spanish context, the paper also elucidates on the different strategies of narration employed in the context of infotainment versus more traditional documentaries. Notably, the data include the use of pop songs to accompany spoken language in the TV programmes.

Mármol Queraltó's contribution also addresses the Spanish context, but with a more specific focus on Gibraltar. The author critically examines how Spanish online newspapers treat a series of events that led to The Rock's new status. He investigates the representations of these political events in both language and image, their variability across newspapers according to their ideological position, and their potential impact on social attitudes towards the Brexit process as it affects Gibraltar. The qualitative analysis shows that different event construals instantiate the ideological positionings of these newspapers, with force-based schematizations reflecting the alignment between Spain and the EU.

Moving to Central Europe, **Miglbauer and Koller** examine humour and emotion in a live text commentary on an Austrian news website. Specifically, they focus on readers' comments on the live streaming of, and live reporting on, a House of Commons debate on Brexit. They find that the live commentary presents a complex and multilayered gestalt of interlocutors reacting to both the parliamentary proceedings and journalists' reporting, but also to each other. Their analysis of the reader comments shows that among the most common linguistic realizations of humour are wordplay, metaphors and similes. In the course of the nine-hour live commentary, readers also express predominantly negative emotions and ridicule. Finally, the paper showcases how sharing humour is connected to expressing emotion and how the use of humour may build a community and in-group.

In her exploration of government discourse, **Brusenbauch Meislová** examines how the Czech and Slovak governments assign blame for Brexit to either the EU or the UK. She combines content analysis and the discourse-historical approach to discourse analysis to news releases by executive government actors. Her findings show that both governments draw on narratives of the EU as a failure and a dysfunctional and incompetent institution as well as on the narratives of misjudgement, indecision and lost control on the UK's part. Both governments apply various blame-attribution strategies such as argumentation, framing and (de)legitimization. The comparative analysis reveals that the Czech government blames the EU, its leaders and institution, for Brexit while the Slovak government primarily blames the UK for damage done to the European project.

Knoblock's paper provides insights into how Brexit is represented from the outsider's, i.e. non-EU, perspective of Russian government-sponsored news agency RT. Her corpus-assisted discourse study reveals a discourse

featuring specific use of lexis, in which Brexit is largely discussed in neutral terms. However, where there is evaluation, it tends to be negative. Of the two main participants in the Brexit process, the UK and the EU, the former is represented as more agentive and in a more nuanced way. RT's discourse on Brexit is further characterized by quoting politicians and experts, which could be explained by not having correspondents for a topic that is not central to Russian politics – notably, other Russian news agencies include very little Brexit-related content – or as an attempt to introduce expert opinion to improve the news agency's reputation.

Beyond national contexts, **Kopf's** paper addresses how a group of predominantly EU citizens discussed Brexit on the Debating Europe online platform between 2016 and 2020. Focusing on various linguistic and discursive parameters, such as referential and predication strategies and intertextual references, she finds that the discussants represent the UK's decision to leave the EU as regrettable, but also as inevitable. Brexit is understood as decidedly disadvantageous for the UK, especially in terms of the UK's economy, research institutions and general loss of control. Moreover, while some postings depict Brexit as negative also for the EU, others suggest that the UK has never been an integral part of the EU and that Brexit might therefore not be problematic for the EU at all.

Aiezza's study of the way EU and UK banks talk to their stakeholders about Brexit broadens the focus on transnational discourse from politics to finance. Combining corpus-assisted discourse analysis with frameworks from crisis communication theory, Aiezza shows how UK banks seek to reassure especially their business customers in genres such as FAQs, while among the EU banks, only Santander, which is also incorporated in Britain, addresses its customers directly. All banks moreover employ expert opinions and analyses to talk about Brexit, with continental European banks not shying away from conveying political standpoints. An analysis of the clusters and collocates relating to the word 'Brexit' demonstrates that both UK and EU banks focus on the possibility of a no-deal Brexit. However, where the UK banks nudge their customers to prepare for that eventuality, banks located in the EU imbue it with negative semantic prosody.

The papers in this special issue display common themes as well as notable differences. As the analyses show, Brexit is primarily viewed negatively, suggesting a significant reputational damage for Britain. The UK and its role in Brexit have been found to instigate ridicule and frustration (Miglbauer & Koller), regret and a feeling of inevitability (Kopf) as well as the use of negative semantic prosody (Aiezza), negative evaluations (Filardo-Llamas; Knoblock) and metaphors that are disadvantageous for the UK (Mármol Queraltó). In particular, frustration among European Union citizens towards the (slow) pace of the negotiations points to the impossibility of accepting the UK back into the European Union in the foreseeable future. The articles further reveal diverse approaches when it comes to the question of who to blame for Brexit. While in Austria and Slovakia, blame is allocated to the UK, in Czechia the European Union is primarily seen as responsible. In Spain, blame for the uncertainty around Brexit's social, political and economic impact is put specifically on UK politicians.

By drawing on data from Spain, Austria, Czechia, Slovakia and Russia, as well as from transnational contexts, the papers in this special issue provide a glimpse at how Brexit is recontextualized outside the UK. While each paper

takes us one step further down the path to understanding various aspects of Brexit, they obviously cannot, and are not intended to, explain the issue in its full complexity. Nevertheless, taken together, the papers advance our understanding of the issue at hand and add to the mosaic of understanding how governments, news agencies, citizens and financial institutions made sense of the aftermath of the Brexit referendum.

4. *Beyond Nations and into the Future*

Some readers may wonder why four of the seven papers in this special issue deal with national contexts, and perhaps even suspect that organizing them by country could reinforce an overly narrow focus. However, not only have we included two transnational studies, it also needs to be acknowledged that EU-wide transnational public spheres and media, where they exist, have often been weak and short-lived (see Wright, 2007), even though ad-hoc discussions on social media might constitute at least a temporary public sphere beyond the nation state (see Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2019; Kopf, 2020). What is more, although Brexit is a supranational issue and the EU spoke with one voice in the negotiations, the variety in bilateral relations between the UK and individual EU member states meant that Brexit had a greater or lesser impact in different countries. This in turn meant that particular member states, most notably Ireland and Spain, had a more significant influence on EU policy formation concerning Brexit. We see this special issue as a first step to exchanging views on discourses of Brexit across countries. As such, the present collection of papers complements previous studies of the linguistic and discursive aspects of Brexit from a British perspective (Koller et al., 2019). It adds to that kaleidoscope of insights by transcending the often inward-looking nature of the British debate, extending the disciplinary scope to include political science and including the often overlooked business aspects of Britain leaving the EU.

While past research has focused on the build-up to, and immediate fall-out from, the 2016 EU membership referendum, the contributors in this special issue home in on the next phase of Brexit. Analysing data from between 2016 and 2019 and writing after the nominal Brexit in early 2020, the authors provide a glimpse into the mid-term effects associated with Brexit and into discourses around Brexit during this period of uncertainty. It remains to be seen how Brexit and its discursive construction in various contexts evolves as we experience the real-life impact of the UK leaving the EU. As former UK Brexit Secretary David Davis said in late 2020, Brexit is not over. Rather, it is a permanent condition whose repercussions are still manifesting and as such deserves continued attention. Future research ought to keep a critical eye on this issue as Brexit's full impact unfolds. In this context, there is a range of aspects that may constitute focal points for discourse analytical and other research. These aspects range from how potential long-term economic and political effects are treated discursively, e.g. what impact the border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain will have in the long run and whether EU unity in the face of a seceding member state can be transferred to other areas of supranational policy making. The effects of Brexit also include possible social and cultural consequences, such as questions regarding the Erasmus student exchange programme and broader intercultural exchange across UK-

EU borders. Finally, future research ought to further explore how Brexit and its effects are addressed on a transnational plane, i.e. how individuals grapple with elements connected to Brexit in various spaces beyond the national level.

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