



The Beginning of 'the Age of Austerity': A Critical Stylistic Analysis of David Cameron's 2009 Spring Conference Speech

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Abstract

This paper investigates David Cameron's use of the word austerity in his keynote speech (as leader of the opposition) at the 2009 Conservative Party spring conference. It builds on previous critical stylistic studies that demonstrate how word forms can take on particular sociopolitical meanings in media and political discourses that are subtly different from the everyday usage of the same word. Such wordforms, which we refer to as sociopolitical keywords, can function as a kind of shorthand for a whole ideological stance (see, for example, Evans and Jeffries 2015; Evans and Schuller 2015; Jeffries and Walker 2018).

Austerity has strong connections with 1940s and '50s Britain, when the consumption of food and clothing was regulated and reduced via rationing. During the 1940s, austerity was frequently used in parliamentary discourse in the House of Commons (Jeffries and Walker 2019). It then re-emerged during the build-up to the 2010 general election when David Cameron and George Osborne (respectively the Conservative leader and shadow Chancellor at that time) repeatedly used the word, possibly in an attempt to evoke past days of supposed national unity. Their veneration of austerity asserted the ideology that public spending cuts, rather than additional public spending, were the solution for the 2008 financial crisis. Those who disagreed with this ideology found themselves in the position of having to argue against a nebulous idea, with little clarity as to what exactly austerity meant.

The paper will outline the methodology for the systematic analysis of a complete text, report on linguistic patterns in the data, and finish by drawing conclusions about the status of austerity as a socio-political keyword.

Key words: *austerity, socio-political keywords, party political discourse*

1. Introduction

In this section, we briefly introduce austerity and discuss our notion of socio-political keywords, explaining our reasons for studying *austerity* as an example of this. We also set out the structure of our study.

1.1 Austerity: The Political Policy

Austerity is the label used for the UK Conservative party's policies aimed at reducing government spending. Austerity has strong connections with 1940s and '50s Britain when the domestic consumption of food and clothing and other goods was regulated and reduced via rationing and controls on pricing. During the austerity of the postwar years, however, governments invested money in UK infrastructure and created the welfare state, including the National Health Service. The kind of austerity practiced in recent years has reduced public sector funding and affected society unevenly, resulting in an increase in inequality, particularly wealth inequality (see for example Stierli et al. 2014; Tepe-Belfrage and Wallin 2016; Powell 2017).

During the build-up to the 2010 general election, David Cameron (then Conservative leader) and George Osborne (then shadow Chancellor) repeatedly used the word *austerity*, possibly in an attempt to evoke past days of supposed national unity. Through their veneration of *austerity*, Cameron and Osborne presented austerity to the electorate in a way that made it an attractive option and persuaded people to vote for it across three general elections. *Austerity* was used to assert the ideology that it is necessary and financially sound to 'balance the books' via public spending cuts (as opposed to the additional public spending of 1940-50s austerity).

Austerity, then, was not only a fit solution for a financial crisis but also perfectly reasonable. Indeed, it was presented as the only possible answer and those who disagreed with this ideology found themselves in the position of having to argue against a nebulous, underspecified idea, and one that had a similarly under-defined label, *austerity*.

1.2 Sociopolitical Keywords

The notion of socio-political keywords takes inspiration from Raymond Williams' (1976 [1983]) cultural keywords, which provided a cultural and lexical/semantic 'snapshot' of postwar Britain and its ideological landscape. We choose to use the term 'sociopolitical keywords' in preference to Williams' 'cultural keywords' because in this and other studies that we have carried out on individual wordforms (see, for example, Evans and Schuller 2015; Jeffries and Walker 2018) our emphasis is on words that we consider to have social and political importance, and which characterize different periods in British political history.

Our work starts from the hypothesis that some wordforms are important indicators and carriers of ideologies. Such lexical items reflect the prevailing ideological and political environment of different periods and increase and decrease in usage and sociopolitical importance over time (see Jeffries and Walker 2017, 2019). Our focus is on how the use and re-use of such

wordforms is driven by, and integral to, political ideologies, to the extent that they may in fact influence the worldview of the media and the electorate. We are interested in looking at the ways in which wordforms may take on political or cultural significance in fairly restricted time periods while recognizing that some neologisms or buzzwords may be short-lived, and therefore not make a great impact on those who are exposed to them (on this point, see also Stubbs 1996). For example, the Conservatives' notion and use of the term 'Big Society' did not last beyond their campaigning for the 2010 general election. Nonetheless, we argue that the investigation of lexical items over short periods can be insightful.

We consider *austerity* to be a sociopolitical keyword because of its explicit adoption by politicians in parliamentary discourse in the House of Commons during the 1940s, and again after the 2008 financial crisis (see Jeffries and Walker 2019), by UK national newspapers (see Jeffries and Walker forthcoming), and by those opposed to public sector cuts including protesters involved in the so-called anti-austerity rallies in the UK in June 2015¹.

1.3 Structure of the article

In section 2 we introduce the text that we used for our study, set out the key research aims and questions that we address, which concern both the content of our data and the method that we used to analyse it, and finish by outlining our analytical approach.

Section 3 presents and discusses the results of our analysis. In 3.1, we focus on the immediate sentential context of all occurrences of *austerity* in the dataset, and seek to determine the meaning(s) of this sociopolitical keyword in our data. In 3.2, we take a broader look at patterns that we identified through the critical stylistic analysis of the full dataset, identifying and analyzing ideologies relating to *austerity* and other political ideas.

Section 4 summarises our findings and makes conclusions about the meaning(s) of *austerity*, political ideologies in the data, and the usefulness of our methodology. We also make suggestions for further research into the meanings and use of sociopolitical keywords based on the analysis of small datasets using a critical stylistic framework.

2. Data, Research Questions and Method of Analysis

Below, we discuss the data that we chose for our investigation of *austerity*, state our research aims and questions, and describe the methodology that we used for our analysis.

2.1 Data

The data for our study of *austerity* is a speech given by David Cameron when he was the leader of the UK Conservative (Tory) party. The speech was given at the Conservative Party Spring Conference in Cheltenham, on 26 April 2009. The transcript of the speech was downloaded from the SayIt website² (mySociety 2013). The speech is 3,815 words in length and is one of Cameron's first speeches to mention austerity. During the period in which Cameron gave

the speech, both he and George Osborne (then shadow chancellor, and later UK chancellor) used the word *austerity* in a number of speeches. This speech was one of the first speeches given by Cameron or Osborne that set out their vision for a policy that has become widely known as *austerity* and that has lasted over 10 years, starving the public sector of funding and causing widespread hardship for many people across the UK. We chose to analyse the 2009 speech as it was a keynote speech at the Conservative Party conference during the run up to the 2010 general election, which saw a Conservative–Liberal Democrat alliance take control of the UK after 15 years of Labour government. Notably, the speech itself bears the title ‘The Age of Austerity’ and it received extensive coverage across numerous news outlets³, helping to put the ideology of austerity on the agenda (Pautz 2018).

2.2 Research Aims and Questions

Our research investigates and demonstrates how the Conservatives presented austerity to the electorate and seeks to address two key research aims. Firstly, we investigate textual meaning(s) of the word *austerity* in this particular data by analysing how each occurrence is placed and functions in its surrounding co-text. Secondly, given that any policy of cuts to the public sector is likely to be unpopular and yet the Conservative party won sufficient votes to form governments in 2010, 2015 and 2017, we investigate how Cameron’s use of language in the speech creates a particular worldview in which a policy of public sector funding cuts (austerity) is not only necessary, but vote-worthy. To achieve this, we carry out a sentence-by-sentence analysis of Cameron’s speech. This analysis is guided by the critical stylistic toolkit (Jeffries 2010a), which helps us to find patterns in the language of the speech and to investigate the ideologies that they represent.

With these research aims in mind we ask the following questions:

- RQ1: What can co-textual analysis tell us about the meaning of *austerity* in Cameron’s 2009 party conference speech?
- RQ2: What particular worldview(s) is (are) textually constructed in Cameron’s 2009 speech that relate to the ideology of austerity?

We acknowledge that basing a study on a small amount of data means that it is not possible to draw broad conclusions about the use of a certain sociopolitical keyword in society more generally. However, this study does enable us to make confident conclusions about the ways in which *austerity* is used in a particular context, and it builds on other strands of research into this keyword. For example, Jeffries and Walker (2019) look at *austerity* in Hansard, while Jeffries and Walker (forthcoming) investigate *austerity* in UK national newspapers. Similar studies could look at the same sociopolitical keyword – or similar or competing keywords – in datasets drawn from other texts or groups of texts.

Our methodology, which we introduce below, aims to be clear and replicable. Through our analysis, we aim to demonstrate the benefits of a systematic sentential analysis and annotation of a small dataset. We also suggest that, while other researchers may come to different interpretations concerning the meaning of *austerity* and the ideologies present in Cameron’s speech, our

method provides a strong basis from which they may carry out their own analysis or, indeed, look at other texts that they deem potentially interesting in terms of their use of *austerity* or other sociopolitical keywords.

2.3 Method of Analysis

Having selected and downloaded our data, we broke the speech into individual orthographic sentences and loaded them into an *Excel* spreadsheet, one per row. This resulted in a spreadsheet of 233 rows. The next stage involved the analysis and annotation of each sentence using the ‘textual-conceptual functions’ proposed by Jeffries (2010a). These functions account for what texts do and how they do it (Jeffries 2014: 409); they are the textual means by which a text presents events and processes and creates relationships (between entities and concepts). The current list of (10) textual-conceptual functions is: ‘naming and describing’; ‘representing actions/events/states’; ‘negating’; ‘equating and contrasting’; ‘exemplifying and enumerating’; ‘prioritising’; ‘implying and assuming’; ‘hypothesising’; ‘presenting others’ speech and thought’; ‘representing time, space and society’. These functions account for the ways in which a text producer has, for example, named things, depicted processes and actions, presented speech and thought, assumed things, or contrasted two things/people in some way.

Using our *Excel* spreadsheet, we added codes to each sentence that identified what functions each sentence was performing (e.g. creating a contrast or using modal verbs to hypothesise about something) with each sentence typically receiving a number of codes since each sentence performed a number of different functions. The annotation of actions/states/events, which is based on Hallidayan (2004) transitivity, was more complicated because our coding identified different types of processes (for example, material action event) and their participants. Given the potential complexity of the clause structure of any given sentence, we made the pragmatic decision to analyse only the main clause in any one sentence in order to make the analysis (and the spreadsheet) more manageable. For instance, Table 1 indicates how we annotated a sentence from the speech for the process expressed in the main clause:

Sentence	Type	Senser	Process	Phenomenon
And now, I just think people are completely sick of it.	Mental cognition	I [Cameron]	think	people are completely sick of it

Table 1. Annotation of a transitivity process

Note that a full analysis of transitivity for this sentence would require the analysis of the subordinate clause that follows ‘think’: a relational intensive process in which ‘people’ is the carrier, ‘are’ is the verb and ‘completely sick of it’ is the attribute. We concluded that once the main clause analysis was complete, we could return to particular process types and analyse sub-clauses more fully during subsequent analysis stages. Note also that a further function of this sentence is that it hypothesizes using the lexical verb *think*.

Given that all sentences in the speech named and described things (i.e. all sentences contained noun phrases), our annotation here captured (i) whether

the naming involved *austerity*, and (ii) structural elements of the noun phrase (e.g. post-modification by prepositional phrase, use of *-ing* participle forms).

Once we had completed the annotation of the dataset, we were able to organise the data according to particular features using, for example, *Excel's* 'filter' function, which allowed us to create particular subsets created by our initial analysis. This enabled us to focus on all sentences that involved particular textual functions, such as constructed oppositions (which we discuss in section 3.2). Another subset that we created and analysed in more detail comprised the 12 sentences in which *austerity* occurs. This subset allowed us to analyse the meaning(s) of *austerity* and thereby address RQ1 (we discuss these results in section 3.1).

While we cannot make claims for the statistical significance of particular patterns that we were able to identify in the dataset, the ability to see at a glance how frequently and where such features of language occurred enabled us to identify 'entry points' (Mautner 2007: 55) for the subsequent analysis of the meanings(s) of *austerity* and other patterns in the data, reported below.

3. Results and Discussion

This section discusses our findings, based on the annotation of the dataset discussed in section 2. Section 3.1 focuses on the subset of 12 sentences in Cameron's speech in which *austerity* occurs, before section 3.2 expands this focus to look at other patterns in Cameron's language.

3.1 The Age of Austerity

Because we are interested in the use of *austerity* in a speech that introduces austerity as a concept and political policy, we began by looking at all the occurrences of *austerity* in the speech. The word occurs 12 times in the speech, including one occurrence in the title – 'The Age of Austerity'. Below, we list every sentence that contains the word *austerity*, with each sentence numbered for ease of reference (our emphasis throughout):

- (1) The Age of Austerity.
- (2) The age of irresponsibility is giving way to the age of austerity.
- (3) First, the age of austerity demands responsible politics.
- (4) Does the age of austerity force us to abandon our ambitions?
- (5) The question is: how does government help achieve these wider aims in the age of austerity?
- (6) Achieving more for less in this age of austerity is not just a technical question of managerial efficiency.
- (7) So our plans for school reform, welfare reform and strengthening families – plans which might once have been seen as just socially desirable, in the age of austerity become economically essential.

- (8) But when there are still millions of people in this country living in poverty, and when the age of austerity means we must focus on the real priorities, can we honestly say it's right for people earning over £50,000 a year to get state benefits in the form of tax credits?
- (9) So it will fall to this Party to offer the responsible politics the country expects in this age of austerity.
- (10) But best of all in this age of austerity, a web-based version of the government's bureaucratic scheme services like Google Health or Microsoft Health Vault cost virtually nothing to run.
- (11) In the age of austerity, where we'll be asking frontline public sector workers to help us keep pay levels down, we cannot leave the pay of public sector bureaucrats untouched.
- (12) In the age of austerity we've got to ask ourselves what we really value in the public sector: and I know what the answer is.

We can immediately notice from this list that all instances of *austerity* are part of the phrase *this/the age of austerity*. The packaging of *austerity* in a noun phrase where it post-modifies *this/the age* presupposes and assumes the existence of such an age and makes it less contestable. Additionally, any period of time that is described as 'an age' is given a weightiness and what O'Hara (2014: 2) calls an 'undeserved legitimacy'.

However, the online *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* definition of *age* raises a question about what is meant by an 'age of austerity'. The *OED* defines the relevant sense of 'age' as:

Sense 7. A distinctive era or period of human history (whether real or mythical), typically characterized by some distinguishing condition or circumstance, by the dominance of a specified person, group, or regime, or by the prevalence of a particular outlook, technology, phenomenon, etc.

Based on this definition, one question that we might ask is 'What are the distinguishing conditions or circumstances of the age of austerity?' If the answer is 'austerity', then we would then need to know what is meant by *austerity*. One way in which the meaning of *austerity* could be expanded upon in the text is if more details were provided via pre/postmodification, as in these made up examples: 'public spending austerity'; 'austerity that will reduce spending on public services'. However, in Cameron's speech, while *austerity* is being used as a modifier, it is itself never modified. This unmodified usage assumes that the meaning of *austerity* is transparent: it is taken for granted that readers and listeners will know what the word means when used in this context. The lack of modification throughout the speech means that *austerity* is left undefined, without description of what it might involve, and not placed in any sort of socio-political context. As we will see, *austerity* is being presented by Cameron as an abstract, positive concept⁴.

The first instance after the title (sentence (2)), occurs close to the start of the speech. This sentence contrasts two ages: 'the age of irresponsibility' and 'the age of austerity' through a textually constructed opposition. The 'X gives way to Y' structure is used to present what Davies (2012: 55) calls a replacive

opposition, in which ‘one of a pair of opposites either is or could be replaced by the other’. We are accustomed to seeing conventional opposites in such structures - e.g. ‘night gives way to day’ - and a similar opposition is being proposed between ‘the age of irresponsibility’ and ‘the age of austerity’, whereby it is only possible to be in one age or the other. It follows that the things that characterize ‘the age of irresponsibility’ (presumably, ‘irresponsible’ levels of public spending) are the opposite of those that characterize ‘the age of austerity’ (presumably, more ‘austere’ levels of public spending). We might further surmise that Cameron is presenting austerity (or things that characterize ‘the age of austerity’) as *not* irresponsible and, therefore, via recourse to a more conventional opposite, that austerity is responsible.

Notice also that ‘the age of irresponsibility’ and ‘the age of austerity’ are the subject and object, respectively, of the phrasal verb *give way*. Since both subject and object refer to inanimate, non-sentient referents, in Hallidayan (2004) terms *give way* is a material action event process, in which the action occurs naturally without any human responsibility or agency. Davies (2012: 55) observes that replacive oppositions can be presented in this way as a ‘fait accompli’, and here the transition from one age to the next is presented as a naturally occurring process that is beyond the control of the Conservatives, or of anyone else. As the actor in the clause, ‘the age of irresponsibility’ is performing the action of giving way, but the nature of the phrasal verb *give way* suggests that there must also be some sort of action on the part of the object. Apparently, ‘the age of austerity’ is exerting some sort of force on ‘the age of irresponsibility’, causing it to give way. The effect of this is that one age is being replaced by another age, and that it is as inevitable and unstoppable. This sentence therefore presents a view of the world in which *austerity* is not a policy that is imposed by humans from the top down, but rather an inevitable consequence of irresponsible government.

In the above-mentioned sentence (3), ‘the age of austerity’ is, using Hallidayan (2004) terminology, the sayer in a verbalisation process:

- (3) First, the age of austerity [sayer] demands [verbalisation process] responsible politics [verbiage].

While we noted that in sentence (2) ‘the age of austerity’ is an inanimate subject, it is nonetheless able to ‘demand’ in the world that Cameron is creating textually. This is a strong reporting verb that further suggests the powerful nature of ‘the age of austerity’: not only is it forcing a previous age to give way, but it is also capable of enforcing policy decisions, which are not determined by politicians.

In the previous sentence (4), the age of austerity is (in a similar way to (2)) the agent in a material action event process. Below we provide additional co-text (emphasis added):

- (4) Is this vision [a fairer, safer, greener Britain] dead? Does the age of austerity force us to abandon our ambitions? No. We are not here just to balance the books.

Again, a world is constructed by the text in which ‘the age of austerity’ can act with human-like agency, and in which it is able to force people to perform certain actions. However, the question and answer structure, in which the first word of the answer (‘no’) negates the proposition in the question, creates a hypothetical scenario in which it may appear that *austerity* can force us to abandon our ambitions, but it cannot in fact do so. We can see this more clearly if we paraphrase the questions and answers as a statement:

The age of austerity does not force us to abandon our ambitions for a fairer, safer greener Britain.

Similarly, the negated statement following ‘no’ - that the Conservatives are *not* just here to balance the books - creates another hypothetical scenario, which is subsequently cancelled. In this scenario, the Conservatives’ only wish is to redress debts. It also creates an implicit connection between ‘the age of austerity’ and ‘balancing the books’, as well as creating a contrast between the balancing of books and the realising of ambitions.

The role of ‘the age of austerity’ in determining policy is also apparent in sentence (8). Here, our living in this particular age is given as the reason that certain aspects of public spending are not tenable:

- (8) But when there are still millions of people in this country living in poverty, and when the age of austerity means we must focus on the real priorities, can we honestly say it’s right for people earning over £50,000 a year to get state benefits in the form of tax credits?

The basic proposition is that people earning over £50,000 a year should *not* receive tax credits (an allowance). However, this is not explicitly stated. Instead, it is implied via a rhetorical question. The phrase ‘the age of austerity’ is part of an adverbial phrase in which it is the subject of the verb ‘means’. If we take ‘means’ in this sentence to be synonymous with ‘entails’ or ‘necessitates’ then we can see that ‘means’ relates to causation (rather than two entities being equated). In Hallidayan (2004) terms, ‘the age of austerity’ is the actor in a material action event process, and ‘we must focus on the real priorities’ is the goal and the inevitable consequence.

Also notable is the pre-modification of ‘priorities’ with ‘real’. The use of ‘real priorities’ presupposes the existence of other possible types of priorities that are ‘non-real’ or ‘bogus’. However, no other types of priorities are mentioned, and ‘real priorities’ gives rise to a Gricean (1975) implicature, caused by a flout of the maxim of quantity, that tax credits for people earning more than £50,000 is not in fact a real priority. The use of ‘real’ in political language is also recognised by Evans and Jeffries (2015: 770-771), who comment that

parties use it to imply that what they offer is genuine, compared to the somehow false offerings of rival parties.

The remaining seven occurrences of *austerity* (excluding the noun phrase title of the speech) are all part of a prepositional phrase in which ‘in’ is the head preposition: ‘in this age of austerity’. Grammatically, each of these examples is the circumstance of the clause in which it occurs, contextualizing the accompanying statements and proposals within a particular state of affairs. The repetition of this prepositional phrase reinforces the idea that we are indeed in ‘the age of austerity’, and provides causative justification for particular beliefs and courses of action. For example, in sentence (7), Cameron’s three-part list of Conservative policies apparently transforms from ‘socially desirable’ to ‘economically essential’ when in the context of *austerity*:

- (7) So our plans for school reform, welfare reform and strengthening families – plans which might once have been seen as just socially desirable, in the age of austerity become economically essential.

Note how this listing of three policies enables Cameron to also imply a ‘sense of unity and completeness’ (Beard 2000: 38) whereby the Conservative plans for education, welfare and families form a natural ‘whole’.

Our analysis of the 12 instances of *austerity* shows that Cameron’s speech presupposes the existence of ‘the age of austerity’. Where ‘the age of austerity’ is the subject of a verb, it is rendered as a force that can act without human agency and make various courses of action inevitable. In their work on the use of austerity in parliamentary discourse and UK national newspapers, Jeffries and Walker (2019, forthcoming) note a similar trend whereby austerity is personified as an animate actor in material action processes and is afforded the ability to, for example, hit, hurt, bite, starve, ravage, hollow out and crucify.

Cameron also constructs an opposition between the ‘age of austerity’ and the ‘age of irresponsibility’, presenting the former as inherently responsible. Such constructed oppositions also present ‘the age of austerity’ as somehow inevitable and capable of acting autonomously. The effect of these language choices is to textually construct a world in which politicians are powerless in the face of an ‘age of austerity’; this helplessness is used as a justification for policies that the electorate may otherwise judge unpalatable. Cameron implies that while Conservative policies might not be popular, there is no alternative, and that planning a different political route would be to act irresponsibly.

In section 3.2, we expand our analysis beyond the sentential context of occurrences of *austerity*. We look at the speech as a whole in order to ascertain how Cameron further builds a worldview in which starving the public sector of funding is a responsible and reasonable course of action.

3.2 Cameron's Textually Constructed Worldview

This section focuses on two distinct patterns in the Cameron speech. We first of all look at Cameron's use of naming and describing, focusing on nominal use of *-ing* participles (section 3.2.1). We then look at patterns related to contrasting and the construction of opposites in discussion of Conservative policies (section 3.2.2).

3.2.1 Naming and *-ing* participles

The textual-conceptual function of naming and describing focuses on the noun phrase and 'the animate, inanimate and abstract 'things' that the projected world of the text contains' (Jeffries 2014: 413). One particular form of naming we noticed through our sentence-by-sentence analysis of Cameron's speech is the use of (44 in total) *-ing* participles either in clauses that function nominally or as gerunds forming part of a larger noun phrase. We report on them here since they have an important function in the textual construction of Cameron's worldview. For reasons of space, we restrict our discussion to a handful of representative examples.

One particular nominal use of an *-ing* participle, 'delivering more for less', occurs four times in the Cameron speech. These are set out below (emphasis added):

- (13) The question is: how does government help achieve these wider aims in the age of austerity? And the answer is: by delivering more for less
- (14) the first and most obvious part of delivering more for less is to deliver the 'less'
- (15) Controlling public spending and delivering more for less must start right now
- (16) Delivering more for less can't just be about top-down cuts imposed by ministers

In each example, the process of *delivering* (notice also in (15) the process of *controlling*) is 'packaged up' (Jeffries 2010a: 19) into a noun phrase. The repetition of this phrase emphasises the nature of the ideology that Cameron is attempting to communicate concerning *austerity* and public services; by using *-ing* participles nominally it allows him to do so without reference to actors or goals. In this way, Cameron avoids saying exactly who will be delivering more for less, thus obscuring the fact that it is likely to be public sector workers who will have to do more work in less time, and for less pay, in order to make good on Conservative policies. Indeed, the difficult nature of the work is strongly hinted at in (15), in which Cameron presents the control of spending and the delivery of more for less as things that 'must' happen. This use of strong deontic modality presents this work as an obligation, but the lack of an agent (a subject who will do the controlling and delivering) means that there is no indication of who must ensure that these objectives are

met. Furthermore, in none of the examples is it made explicit what exactly the generalised notions signified by the nouns *more* and *less* refer to. This allows Cameron to emphasise the idea that ‘more for less’, like *austerity*, is a general ideological approach and a general good that will have beneficial effects wherever it is applied.

The use of nominal *-ing* participles makes processes into entities in a similar way to nominalisation, discussed by Fowler (1991). He observes the transformation of clauses into nouns and the resulting ‘reification’, through which ‘processes and qualities assume the status of *things*’ (Fowler 1991: 80; emphasis in original). As Fairclough (2001: 103) points out, nominalisations are notable for the way that they omit any actors or goals. In a similar way, when *-ing* participles are used nominally they make processes into ‘things’ and omit participants. Also lost is a sense of time: as Langacker (2008: 120-2)⁴ puts it, the process becomes atemporalised. Cameron uses the reification afforded by nominal *-ing* participle forms to make certain actions ‘things’, but without taking or assigning responsibility for their completion. He therefore avoids saying that it is likely to be public sector workers who are likely to be the ones hit most by *austerity* by bearing the brunt of any cuts.

Other examples include those set out below (all emphasis added):

- (17) But cutting spending the country can do without is not going to deliver the scale of change we need.
- (18) let’s not pretend that cutting waste, and turning round the culture, will be enough to deal with the decade of debt that will be Labour’s legacy
- (19) transparency is such a powerful tool in controlling public spending
- (20) That [discipline] means making sure that public sector pay and pensions reflect the realities of the economic situation.
- (21) In this new world comes the reckoning for Labour’s economic incompetence.

Examples (17), (18) and (19) perform a similar function to those already discussed, whereby actors and goals are left unmentioned in relation to the cutting and controlling of spending and waste. In (20), the underlined *-ing* participle clause forms the direct object of the verb *means* and contains a further subordinated clause that is vague and euphemistic. In particular, the noun phrase ‘the realities of the economic situation’ does not make clear that what Cameron (and the shadow chancellor, George Osborne) had in mind were pay freezes, cuts and rather drastic changes to the terms and benefits of some public sector pensions. In example (20), then, the loss of actor and goal that is achieved through the *-ing* participle clause is especially pertinent, since knowing who is going to be making sure that ‘public sector pay and pensions reflect the realities of the economic situation’ is crucial. The packaging up of the action into a clause that functions nominally present the action as an event that is happening under its own steam, without human intervention. This way

of presenting actions links to how Cameron also depicts *austerity* and ‘the age of austerity’ as an inevitable force that determines political policy.

In (21), the underlined noun phrase packages up propositional content that involve processes, which we might paraphrase as:

Labour are economically incompetent
The economic incompetence of labour will be reckoned (by ?)

The process of reckoning Labour’s incompetence (which is presupposed by virtue of it being a noun phrase) is presented by Cameron as an entity that is a participant in a material action event. Here, ‘the reckoning’ is not presented as a process, but the fact that it ‘comes’ is, and this coming appears to be inevitable. Here, again, the use of a nominal form means that there is a loss of participants, and also no sense of time. Also, Cameron builds on his worldview, which we discussed in section 3.1 in relation to the ‘age of austerity’, where a further force (‘the reckoning’) is driving policy, suggesting that unpalatable actions (such as freezing public sector wages) are inevitable consequences to events that act without human agency.

3.2.2 Contrasting and Conservative policies

The significance of textually constructed contrasts in political texts has been observed in previous critical stylistic studies (see Davies 2012; Jeffries 2010b), with Davies (2012: 70) noting that the frequent use of ‘constructed binaries’ is ‘part of their rhetorical armoury’. Unsurprisingly, there are many examples in Cameron’s speech. Given the nature of oppositional politics, many of these directly or indirectly draw on apparent differences between the Conservative party (the political party that was then in opposition) and the Labour party (then in power). This can be seen in the following example, which uses parallel syntactic structures to contrast the parties and their policies (emphasis added):

(22) **Labour’s approach** is just to treat the symptoms by spending more money. **Our approach** is to understand why people are stuck in poverty in the first place, and help them break free by tackling welfare dependency, addiction, debt, poor schooling and above all, family breakdown.

In (22), the parallel syntax produces a constructed opposition through an ‘X is A, Y is B’ opposition frame. In the context of a Conservative party speech, ‘Labour’s’ and ‘Our [the Conservatives]’ are likely to be understood by hearers and readers as being more or less examples of what Davies (2012) calls ‘canonical’ opposites: opposites that do not need to be put into such frames in order to be understood as such. However, the elements that are contrasted in the parallel complements of each sentence are not conventional opposites. Cameron uses these to define the nature of each party’s approach, and to imply that his party will spend less money than Labour. While we might expect Cameron to construct an opposite that clearly contrasts with Labour’s approach - ‘to treat the symptoms by spending more money’ - he instead

summarises his party's approach as 'to understand why people are stuck in poverty [...] and help them break free'. Here, then, there is an opposition between 'spending money' and 'being understanding and helpful'; the binary nature of such structures implies that it is a choice between one or the other: you cannot both spend more money and be understanding and helpful. This contrast enables Cameron to present the cutting of public spending in a relatively positive light: spending money is actually counterproductive, and the alternative, compassion, is more beneficial.

Other examples of constructed oppositions reflect Cameron's notion of a shift between parties, and the associated transition between one 'age', which is synonymous with irresponsibility, and a new age, synonymous with *austerity* and responsibility. This shift is constructed, in particular, through instances of replacive opposition and transitional opposition. For example (emphasis added):

- (23) by *replacing* Labour's spendaholic government *with* a new government of thrift

Cameron's notion of replacing one type of government with another reinforces the opposition between perceived (over)spending on public services on the one hand and cuts on the other. This replacive opposition relates to Cameron's observation concerning different 'ages' (see section 3.1). The attribution of these opposed policies to each party through naming emphasises the clear-cut distinction between parties and policies: 'spendaholic government' is clearly attributed to Labour through the use of the possessive form 'Labour's', while the quality of thriftiness is intrinsic to the unspecific 'a new government'. The importance of new, *austerity*-driven policies is further emphasised through a transitional opposition:

- (24) So our plans for school reform, welfare reform and strengthening families, plans which might once have been seen as just socially desirable, in the age of austerity *become* economically essential.

In (24), the verb *become* gives rise to an opposition whereby what was 'socially desirable' is now 'economically essential'. Once again, Conservative policies are being driven by something other than just the party's ideals: the adverbial 'in the age of austerity' is the circumstance in which the process of becoming 'economically essential' occurs, determining the needfulness of the party's policies.

The above examples suggest that Cameron has a desire to avoid blame for certain policies ('tackling welfare dependency', 'school reform', 'welfare reform') that could sound as though they would involve cuts to public services and therefore be unpopular. Instances of concessive opposition enforce this impression. Concessive opposition structures are prototypically triggered by the conjunction 'but', and generate an opposition 'between the EXPECTED and the UNEXPECTED' (Davies 2012: 58). Cameron makes use of this

particular type of opposition for several purposes: to make excuses for potentially unpopular policies, to stress that *austerity* has some positive aspects, and to attribute the ultimate responsibility for *austerity*-related policies to the public. We saw this type of opposition in example (8) (which we repeat below) and we see it again in (25) (emphasis added):

- (8) It is not easy, or popular, for governments to take away money from people. *But* [...] when the age of austerity means we must focus on the real priorities can we honestly say it's right for people earning over £50,000 a year to get state benefits in the form of tax credits?
- (25) it will fall to this Party to offer the responsible politics the country expects in this age of austerity. *But* it expects more from us than a hair shirt and a stern lecture.

In both examples, Cameron recognizes the drawbacks of *austerity* while also stressing its necessity, and observes an apparent public demand for it. In the first example, the X part of the 'X, but Y' opposition structure notes the unpopularity of spending cuts; the concessive clause asks a rhetorical question about the rightness or otherwise of a state of affairs in which 'people earning over £50,000 a year' earn state benefits. By choosing to highlight this particular, relatively well-off, part of the electorate, Cameron implies that Conservative cuts will only affect the well-off few, and that cuts to the benefits that these people receive - as laid out in the circumstance 'when the age of austerity means we must focus on the real priorities' - are the only morally viable action to take. In the second example, the concessive clause implies the necessity of deeds, as well as words: Cameron flouts the maxim of quantity (Grice 1975) by stating that people will expect 'more [...] than a hair shirt and a stern lecture', without stating exactly what this might involve (perhaps because cuts to public services would sound distasteful). Notably, similar to *austerity* elsewhere in the speech, the nation is presented as somehow driving or demanding spending cuts: '*the country* expects [the responsible politics]', '*it* expects more from us'. Furthermore, a material action event process in the first clause presents the Conservatives' policies as though they represent some sort of duty, rather than the party's actual ideals: 'it *will fall* to this Party to offer the responsible politics'. Here, the Conservatives are simply the party to which responsibility 'falls': again, it is not Conservative ideology driving Conservative policies, but circumstances that drive the actions that the party will take upon election.

Where concessive opposition is used to note the alleged positive aspects of *austerity*, it highlights the moving of services to an online environment and cheerier prospects for future generations (emphasis added):

- (26) when they [people]'re in control of their own health records, they're more interested in their health [...] *But* best of all in this age of austerity, a web-based version of the government's bureaucratic scheme services [...] costs virtually nothing to run

- (27) Yes if we win the election, we may not see the full fruits of our labours in the lifetime of our government. *But* if we stick together and tackle this crisis our children and grandchildren will thank us for what we did for them and for our country

In (26), the first clause notes the benefits of people having control of their health records, before conceding that this is a minor benefit compared to the fact that, in ‘the age of austerity’, certain services will be inexpensive to run. Here, both the ‘control’ that people will have of their health records and the cheapness of running services may constitute a more appealing way of referring to cuts to public services. Example (27) focuses on more long-term benefits, conceding that while ‘we’ might not benefit from Conservative policies and *austerity*, future generations will. This constitutes another way in which Cameron can cast *austerity* as an unpleasant duty or burden that ‘we’ (note the use of the plural pronoun, with vague application) must go through together, so that others may benefit.

4. Summary and Conclusions

In this article, we have analysed David Cameron’s keynote speech at the 2009 Conservative party conference. Our analysis has shown that Cameron presented a worldview that made austerity seem inevitable and a force that was beyond the control of politicians. Rather than austerity being a policy choice that politicians made, it is just a situation that we find ourselves in which requires certain actions. Aligned to this worldview was Cameron’s use of nominal forms that removed agency from processes in a way that further ignored that politicians would be the ones making policy decisions and that the general public, particularly those working in the public sector, would be the ones bearing the brunt of those decisions. Additionally, the textually constructed opposites in Cameron’s speech presents austerity as a responsible, as well as a benevolent, policy choice.

This paper also outlined our process for analysis. Our approach was a sentence-by-sentence analysis using *Excel*, whereby we used codes to indicate what each sentence, or part of a sentence, was ‘doing’ in constructing a worldview. We used Jeffries’ (2010a) critical stylistic tools as our framework for analysing and coding each sentence. In this way we were able to carry out a systematic and rigorous analysis of the text. Inevitably, though, due to restrictions of space, we have had to present only a selection of our results in our discussion. It is also worth saying that not all our results were interpretatively important in that they did not help in answering our specific research aims. However, they may be useful in addressing other questions about the speech, or in making comparisons between the Cameron speech and other texts. An initial sentence-by-sentence analysis, using the full range of textual-conceptual functions, allowed us to identify patterns and provides a foundation for further work.

In our analysis we noted the nominal use of *-ing* participle forms and that such usage made processes into entities and at the same time removed participants and temporality. Our intuition was that this occurred frequently

in our data. In order to test out this intuition (and whether this pattern of usage is a style feature of the text, the text producer or of political speeches more generally) we would need to carry out further research involving a series of comparisons using larger datasets (corpora).

Notes

1. See, for example, the BBC (2015) news story.
2. The mySociety archive of Conservative party speeches covers the years 2010-2013.
3. See, for example, Summers (2009) in *The Guardian* and Brady (2009) in *The Independent*.
4. *Austerity* here is comparable to the similarly unmodified uses of *choice* in political manifestos that were identified by Evans and Jeffries (2015: 772), which took on the aura of ‘absolute good’.
5. We wish to thank Louise Nuttall for directing us to Langacker’s work on -ing participle forms.

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