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BREXIT FRAMING IN BRITISH MEDIA

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Abstract

2019 brings about fiery debates and endless questions about the United Kingdom’s current and future relation to the European Union. An important aspect is whether the United Kingdom should or should not organise another national referendum regarding membership in the European Union. It is, nevertheless, equally important to identify the causes and reasons that led to the vote in favour of Leave in the 2016 referendum, widely known as Brexit. It is contended here that the British media played an important role in shaping the citizens’ options, imposing themselves as actors in the construction of a sociological phenomenon with serious effects and consequences. Combining the linguistic and cultural perspectives, with scientific tools from the domain of Discourse Analysis, this paper will look into several relevant pro- and anti-Brexit views, as presented by important British newspapers to the wide public, tracing their arguments and the way in which manipulation was achieved on both Leave and Remain sides..

Keywords: Brexit; media; manipulation, framing; immigration; discourse analysis;

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Europe as a united entity, which spans a little more than half a century, if one considers its beginning in 1957, with the Treaty of Rome and the foundation of the European Economic Community (EEC), or over twenty-six years, if one chooses to regard the Maastricht Treaty, entering into force on November 1st, 1993 as the starting point, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has constantly displayed ambivalent sentiments and reactions to the concept, either named as such or just implied, of a ‘European Union’. Their reaction could be ironic if one thinks that, in September 1946, just one year after the disaster of the World War II came to an end, it was Winston Churchill who advocated, in a speech delivered in Zurich, the imperative necessity of such a union:

I wish to speak about the tragedy of Europe, this noble continent, the home of all the great parent races of the Western world, the foundation of Christian faith and ethics, the origin of most of the culture, arts, philosophy and science both of ancient and modern times. If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance there would be no limit to the happiness, prosperity and glory which its 300 million or 400 million people would enjoy. [...]

The structure of the United States of Europe will be such as to make the material strength of a single State less important. Small nations will count as much as large ones and gain their honour by a contribution to the common cause (Churchill, 1946, winstonchurchill.org).



However, the Brits' constant questioning of their membership, from their refusal to join the EEC in its incipient stage to the 2016 Brexit referendum (and beyond, when exiting seems to be finally taking place effectively) is to be sought for in the British mindset, in their insularity, imperialism, and bluntly put, in their barely concealed sense of superiority. Ironically enough, it was also Winston Churchill who, during the interwar years, had given the directions of a Pan-European Union that would NOT include Britain. In a chapter entitled 'Churchill and Europe - A Revision', published in the volume *European Integration and Disintegration: East and West*, edited by Bideleux and Taylor, Clive Ponting reassesses Churchill's position in relation to a possible unification of the European states, claiming that his advocacy of the so-called 'United States of Europe' has been misunderstood, critics and commenters having been constantly disregarding the British Prime Minister's imperialism. Born and raised in the Victorian Age, in office when Britain was still THE colonial power, Churchill was indeed advocating a form of European unification back in the 1930s, except for the fact that the respective union was not to include Britain whatsoever. Ponting cites a statement of Churchill published by *Saturday Evening Post*, which is relevant for the premise of this paper, which is why it is also quoted below: *We see nothing but good and hope in a richer, freer, more contented European commonality. But we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe but not of it. We are linked but not compromised. We are interested and associated but not absorbed* (Churchill, 1930 qtd. in Ponting, 1996: 37-38).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

After a long and complicated relationship between the UK and the European community, in which Charles de Gaulle's veto prevented the UK to join the EEC two times before its actual entering in 1973, and in which the British Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, advocated their participation in the EEC, but without the formation of a federative Europe that would have affected national sovereignty, in her opinion, came the 'moderate Conservatism' years of 1990-1997, i.e. the premiership of John Major, marked by "tough challenges: the Gulf War, "Black Wednesday", a party split over the Maastricht Treaty, the rise of New Labour and the emergence of Eurosceptic single-issue parties, etc." (Haigron, 2009: 177). Euro-scepticism had actually manifested long before John Major's premiership years and was going to increase during the office of Tony Blair. The adoption of a single currency – to which the UK did not acquiesce, and the two enlargements of the EU in 2004 (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and 2007 (Romania and Bulgaria) generated new concerns regarding the influx of cheap labour.

Adding to such financial concerns, as well as to the immigration question, there is also the constant British discontent with not actually being among the leaders of the European Union. The contradictions between the UK and the EU began to intensify even more in 2010, with the coming to power of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Refusing to participate in the Eurozone summits and vetoing the new EU fiscal policy agreement, Prime Minister David Cameron opened both the path to an active Euro-sceptic opposition in the European Parliament and, ultimately, to the 2016 in-out national referendum dubbed Brexit.

The unequivocal question posited to the British citizens was "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?" which should not have raised any problems of (mis)understanding. On June 23rd, 2016, ~52% of the voters chose to 'leave' and only 48% to 'remain', which is consistent with the opinion polling carried out since 2010, in which the options were evenly divided. In 2012, *The Guardian* stated that "56% of Britons would vote to quit EU in referendum, poll finds" and that "overall just 28% of likely voters think the EU is a 'good thing' while 45% think it is a 'bad thing'" (Boffey and Helm, 2012, online). It is contended further that the British media played an important role in shaping the citizens' options, imposing themselves as actors in the construction of a sociological phenomenon with serious effects and consequences. Just like the two campaigning groups, Britain Stronger in Europe, in favour of 'remain', on the one hand, and Leave.EU (supported by UKIP) and Vote Leave (supported by the Euro-sceptic faction of the Conservative Party), on the other, the British media divided their readership into supporters of the two options. The media in favour of leave went to unprecedented lengths to 'speak,' loudly, in a language that any voter could understand, of three major issues that should have determined the British citizen to want 'out': immigration (here including the imposed refugee quota and a labour market open to Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian workers),

financing the poorer EU states, thus disfavoured the local economy, and last but surely not least, the imposition of various policies by Brussels or, even worse, by Germany and France. Relying heavily on the British mindset and views on their relations with the continent, epitomized by Churchill's statement quoted above – we are with Europe but not of it -, and also on in-your-face arguments placing the Britons in a position of a 'self' undermined and threatened by the foreign (European) 'other', the 'Leave' newspapers contributed to a great extent to the shaping of the 2016 vote and, by way of consequence, to the situation the country finds itself in at this moment, when a hard, 'no deal' Brexit is just around the corner.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Interestingly enough, the people of the United Kingdom seem to have awoken, in the meantime, to the prospects of what awaits the country after its self-imposed isolation from Europe. Resting on a significant number of arguments in favour of Remain, e.g. an online list of no less than "98 Reasons To Stay In The EU: Benefits Of Membership For The UK" (which had better been outlined before June 23rd, 2016), the Brits looked throughout 2018 and in the first months of 2019 (before Theresa May's stepping down from office) into ways of annulling the effects of their vote. Revoking unilaterally Article 50 ("Any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements.") was an idea, a re-referendum was another, though quickly dismissed. Films were released to put on display the propaganda apparatus that divided Britain – an excellent example in this respect is playwright James Graham's production *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (HBO 2019). As Sarah Helm notes in her review published by *The Guardian* (a newspaper constantly in support of Remain),

Graham, or his directors and producers, were right to stage this Brexit drama when they did. Just as it was broadcast, showing the leave campaign devising its winning slogan – Take Back Control – the political order collapsed further, our leaders never so out of control as they headed to the cliff edge. Nor has any piece of journalism bettered Graham's focus-group scene in portraying how the poison of Brexit has set ordinary people against each other, or exposed how easily our feeble leaders were led by opportunistic apparatchiks. (The Guardian, Jan. 10, 2019).

Starting from the idea expressed by the same journalist in the article quoted above, that "the failure of journalists to present the truth about Europe and our relationship with it is much to blame for the mess we are in today", this study attempts to look into a corpus of newspaper articles on both sides, published before the referendum. Combining the linguistic and cultural perspectives, with scientific tools from the domain of Discourse Analysis, the paper will trace their main arguments and the way in which manipulation of the voters' views was better performed by the Leave side.

4. DISCUSSIONS

In social sciences, from which linguistics should not and cannot be divorced, framing refers to a set of means by which individuals, groups and entire societies come to perceive and understand reality. It is a communicative scheme that relies on rhetoric and sociolinguistics attributes such as interpretation, representation, stereotype, and conceptual metaphor, in order to convey and conceptualize information in such a way that the message receivers end up perceiving realities in a constructed, steered manner. Simply put, the media and other purveyors of language create frames and favour certain interpretations over others, thus acquiring mass consent over political, social, economic or cultural matters. "Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience. The word salience itself needs to be defined: It means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences" (Entman, 1993: 53). In the article cited, Robert M. Entman exemplifies media framing making use of a topical event at the time: the impending war in Iraq. Fed with only two options, the American public came to interiorize, via the media, what the elites wanted them to accept: that negotiations were off the table: *Reflecting the play of power and boundaries of discourse over an issue, many news texts exhibit homogeneous framing at one level of analysis, yet competing frames at another. Thus, in the pre-war debate over U.S. policy toward Iraq, there was a tacit consensus among U.S. elites not to argue for such options as negotiation between Iraq and Kuwait. The news frame included only two remedies, war now or sanctions now with war (likely) later, while problem definitions, causal analyses, and moral evaluations were homogeneous (1993: 55).*

Basically, it is not what is said but how, when, where, to whom is said. Because framing is also contextually and culturally dependant. And when the addressee is British, insularity and imperialism come into play. Not playing upon Britishness is probably the error committed by the 'Remain' media. (It is high time we mentioned that, owing to space constraints, only the written media is referred to here.). Among the British newspapers that advocated that the UK remain a part of the European Union, the most relevant were *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *Financial Times*, whilst on the Leave side one should list *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Sunday Times*. If one notes in this 'great divide' a distinction between quality and tabloid press, one is not far from truth. Could it also be the discourse simplicity of the latter, as opposed to the (leftist) intellectualism displayed by the journalists of *The Guardian*, for instance, what better convinced the average readership? It may well be the case.

Brexit framing was at least threefold, as mentioned above: immigration, finances, and Brussels control over the internal affairs of the United Kingdom. While the political reasons of the elites might have been manifold, these three were most often circulated by the Leave press because they spoke most straightforwardly to every Tom, Dick and Harry. How could one not fear 'the Arab threat' induced by Merkel's imposition of a refugee quota in the circumstance of the Syrian crisis? How can Britons forget about what happened to their American cousin on 9/11 and to themselves on 7/7? "Increasingly the press constructed the image of an immigration system, and by extension, a nation manipulated, 'abused' and compromised by 'illegal' migrants who were prone to criminality and even terrorism", note Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore in an extended analysis on the press coverage of the refugee crisis (2015: 15). Another immediate threat to the average British citizen is the free circulation within the borders of the EU, which 'floods' the British Isles' shores with Romanians, Bulgarians and Polish willing to accept underpaid jobs. *Flood* is among the most frequently used metaphors to British media when it comes to Eastern European migrants, alongside *wave*, *surge*, *flow* and other conceptualisations of water as dangerous, note Neagu and Colipcă-Ciobanu in the chapter 'Metaphor and Self/Other Representations: A Study on British and Romanian Headlines on Migration' (2014). Just a few days before the referendum, on June 19th, 2016, *The Sun* is playing this card again in an article entitled "A vote for Brexit is all it takes to set Britain free": "Scrapping the free movement of people — that sacred foundation stone of the EU — will finally give Britain some control over the numbers of migrants *flooding in* from Europe"; "full border controls will allow us to regulate *the flow*"; "it could be to relieve the pressure on the working-class communities that have been hit by *the surge* in their migrant population".

More important than the ability "to pick and choose the migrants with the skills [they] need", presumably possible only in the case of a leave vote, much more important than the possibility "to free up [their] net contribution to the EU — a *staggering* £250 million a week — to spend wherever it is most needed. That could be *the NHS*." (one should note the adjective *staggering* used to enhance the readers' reaction to the large amount of money mentioned, and also the reference to the health system, modalized by 'could' — as in, we cannot promise you this), is the appeal to the British pride (and prejudice). It sets out from the very headline: "to set Britain free". Needless to say that Britain WAS free but the tabloid keeps claiming that it was not: "we can follow in the footsteps of other major democracies *by gaining our independence*." (Ironically enough, the democracies they speak about are the American, Canadian and Australian ones, and it is far from being a historical secret from whom they gained their independence.). The EU is conceptualised as a *monster* that keeps Britain in a *stranglehold*, *engulfing* their democracy. In another article, published on June 13th, Brussels — used as a synecdoche for the entire EU — is *dictatorial*, and the UK must, again, become *free from* a European Union that is "greedy, wasteful, bullying and breathtakingly incompetent". By contrast, Britain would assess their sovereignty by leaving the EU, turning back into a "self-governing, powerful nation *envied* by all".

While *The Sun* and, by extension, all tabloid media push forward all these imagined dangers that await Britain should they remain in the EU, playing upon an inherited imperialist naivety of the Brits taught for centuries to regard themselves as superiorly isolated and at the same time, valiant and worthy conquerors of the world, quality newspapers play the (losing) card of explaining in complicated, almost academic terms, why Brexit is "a journey into the unknown" (*The Guardian*, June 24th, 2016). They rather feebly debunk the leavers' arguments — feebly in the sense of the public appeal of their reasoning — instead of finding believable arguments for Remain. They are ironic in their pointing out that the Leave supporters manipulate figures, and they also commit the unpardonable error of appealing to authority

(argumentum ab auctoritate): Brexiteers [...] have their own slew of figures to show how much money would be freed up by the return of Britain's £8bn a year contribution to EU funds, a figure much disputed and already spent many times over by the Leave campaign. Experts in every field from City giants and economists to university researchers and public health officials, are overwhelmingly for Remain. Barack Obama said it as clearly as he decently can. But who needs experts in a populist era? (White, 2016 in The Guardian)

Equally ironic is their option to publish, just a few days before the referendum, whilst the Leavers crowd their press with all the arguments available at hand, as shown above, a lengthy article signed by an American political editor. Entitled “What is Brexit and why does it matter? The EU referendum guide for Americans” - cui prodest, anyway? – the article employs an elevated vocabulary – “Industrial unrest amid persistent economic malaise in Europe, the refugee crisis and terrorist attacks have all contributed to a deep and urgent sense of foreboding across the continent” – which is of course accessible to the readers of The Guardian but, at the same time, can serve as an extra argument for the small yet significant margin by which the Leavers won.

5. CONCLUSION

As White remarks, “the campaign for Brexit feeds on decades-old, home-grown resentments. Real or imagined, they include nostalgia for imperial certainties and for pre-globalised jobs for life, plus resentment of immigrants and of rules imposed by “unelected” courts and commissions in Brussels” (The Guardian 2016). The arguments of multiculturalism and globalization could not convince the majority of the self-centred British nation to stick with the others in a union, even though the political, social and economic effects of their choice are foreseeably catastrophic in the long run (an aspect that the British have already come to realise, a little too late). Just as the population is divided between urban and rural, young and old, elites and commoners – with the former in each pair in favour of Remain, and the latter, in favour of Leave, the media were split between intellectualism and populism, and as it usually happens, the latter prevailed.

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