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# How is Brexit Linguistically Conceptualized? The BREXIT IS A JOURNEY metaphor scenario in David Cameron's, Theresa May's and Boris Johnson's Speeches

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## Introduction

- 1 On 23 June 2016, against all odds, 52% of the UK citizens voted to leave the European Union. This was both the result and the consequence of great political turmoil that took over Westminster Parliament. Brexit as a political entity and reality just started existing after the UK formally left the EU on 31 January 2020, yet various researchers, among whom linguists (Charteris-Black, Morozova, Musolff, Silaški & Đurovic, etc.<sup>1</sup>) had already extensively worked on this discourse object. A commentator on *The Guardian's* website defined Brexit as “the undefined being negotiated by the unprepared in order to get the unspecified for the uninformed”<sup>2</sup>, and we found it interesting to study the language used by speakers to talk about and conceptualize it, more particularly, the last three Prime Ministers: David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson. Following the precepts of cognitive linguistics<sup>3</sup>, we deem language reflects our conceptual system and the way we perceive the world. Language is the principal way of apprehending and making sense of reality, and studying the language we use, consciously or unconsciously, sheds light upon the way abstract concepts are constructed. This article will develop the results of a previous study we carried out on the Conservative and Brexit rhetoric<sup>4</sup> by adopting a cognitive linguistic, discourse-based approach, following the methodology we adopted in a previous study<sup>5</sup>.

- 2 Our linguistic analysis will focus on the conceptualization of Brexit by Tory Prime Ministers David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson through an analysis of the JOURNEY metaphors in 92 speeches they delivered. To follow up on the previous study in which we performed lexicometric analyses, i.e. analyses regarding the lexical frequencies of some keywords (KWIC), as well as textometric analyses, i.e. analyses on the lexical specificities of a text, the characteristic lexicon of a text, the contextual attractiveness of words in a text, etc.<sup>6</sup>, we will focus on the semantic domains – in other words the notional domains – the three Prime Ministers most frequently resort to, with the help of USAS (UCREL Semantic Analysis System), via linguistic investigations with WMatrix4<sup>®</sup>, and more particularly on the BREXIT IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor. We will first analyze the degree of lexicalization of the JOURNEY metaphors used by the three Prime Ministers, then the direction of the JOURNEY metaphors, and finally the axiology / evaluation they offer to conceptualize Brexit.

## Corpus, theoretical framework and methodology

### Corpus building / Data collection

- 3 Our corpus of interest encompasses speeches from David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson, members of the Conservative Party who succeeded to each other at the head of the party during the Brexit “crisis”. Although they share the same political affiliation, they do not necessarily endorse the same outlook on the UK’s relationship with the EU, as we will show by studying the different metaphors they use to conceptualize Brexit. The corpus gathered for this study is constituted of transcripts of official statements on the theme of Brexit. These transcripts were collected from the database provided by the UK’s government website [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk). The period under scrutiny spans from 2015 to 2019, a period during which the Brexit “fiasco” was at its pinnacle. To collect the data, combination of keywords to browse through the aforementioned database was used, such as: Theresa May; Boris Johnson; David Cameron/Brexit/prior to 2019. 92 transcripts were gathered and arranged into three sub-corpora: one for each Prime Minister. The whole corpus is distributed as follows: 34 transcripts for Theresa May (67,474 tokens<sup>7</sup>), 31 transcripts for David Cameron (64,606 tokens), and 24 for Boris Johnson (50,169 tokens). This constitutes a rather balanced set of data, which will enable us to draw comparisons between the three sub-corpora.

### Theoretical framework: cognitive linguistics

- 4 These transcripts constitute our set of data to further investigate how Brexit is represented in the speeches of Cameron, May and Johnson, mostly through the JOURNEY metaphor scenario<sup>8</sup> (see section 3). By analysing how each Prime Minister conceptualizes Brexit through the metaphors they use, we aim to uncover how this representation may differ and how each metaphor scenario constructs a somehow different representation of Brexit. To do so, we worked within the framework of cognitive linguistics, a branch of linguistics taking interest in the way our conceptual system is reflected in language,<sup>9</sup> so as to get a grasp of how abstract concepts are mentally conceptualized:

Cognitive linguistics approaches language in a way that prioritizes human thought as an explanation for the observed characteristics of language. In particular conceptualization, or how people construct abstract concepts and schemata to think about the world.<sup>10</sup>

- 5 The numerous works in cognitive linguistics have shown that metaphor is one of the tools – if not *the* tool – that greatly contributes to the elaboration of a figurative link between cognition and language. According to cognitive linguists, not only is metaphor a means of conveying meaning, but also a reflection of our thoughts and reasoning: “Metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason.”<sup>11</sup> This assumption led to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT from now on), developed by Lakoff and Johnson. According to CMT, metaphor operates not only at the level of language, but also structures our conceptual system<sup>12</sup>, and the use of linguistic metaphorical expressions is proof that we do think metaphorically; indeed, it is possible to use metaphors to talk about a specific concept because this concept is first and foremost metaphorically conceptualized on a cognitive level, as will be demonstrated in section 3.

## Methodology: corpus linguistics

- 6 To analyze the three corpora and the semantic patterns that contribute to the way Brexit is framed in the speeches, we resorted to various corpus linguistics tools. Corpus linguistics is a branch of linguistics that has recently gained popularity amongst linguists and which can be defined as follows: “Corpus linguistics is perhaps best described for the moment in simple terms as the study of language based on examples of ‘real life’ language use”.<sup>13</sup> The aim of a corpus-based analysis is to collect a set of data representative of a specific type of authentic excerpts of language use in order to study a particular linguistic phenomenon, Brexit as far as we are concerned:

We could define corpus linguistics as dealing with some set of machine-readable texts which is deemed an appropriate basis on which to study a specific set of research questions.<sup>14</sup>

- 7 We largely relied on corpus linguistics, the benefits of which are highlighted by Brown & Mondon for the study of political discourse:

Critically, with its capacity for automated analysis of large corpora, CL [Corpus Linguistics] is able to offer greater breadth than is possible with in-depth, qualitative discourse studies. [...] CL offers essential tools enabling us to track its usage and emerging patterns across the entire corpus.<sup>15</sup>

- 8 In this study, we mostly used WMatrix4<sup>®</sup> to analyze the key semantic domains related to the perception and framing of Brexit in each set of data, and more particularly the BREXIT IS A JOURNEY metaphor scenario. WMatrix4<sup>®</sup> is a software tool developed by a group of researchers at Lancaster University. It features a semantic tagger, labelled USAS (UCREL Semantic Analysis System), which groups together words belonging to the same semantic field into pre-existing semantic categories as shown in the chart in Figure 1:

<b>A</b> general and abstract terms	<b>B</b> the body and the individual	<b>C</b> arts and crafts	<b>E</b> emotion
<b>F</b> food and farming	<b>G</b> government and public	<b>H</b> architecture, housing and the home	<b>I</b> money and commerce in industry
<b>K</b> entertainment, sports and games	<b>L</b> life and living things	<b>M</b> movement, location, travel and transport	<b>N</b> numbers and measurement
<b>O</b> substances, materials, objects and equipment	<b>P</b> education	<b>Q</b> language and communication	<b>S</b> social actions, states and processes
<b>T</b> Time	<b>W</b> world and environment	<b>X</b> psychological actions, states and processes	<b>Y</b> science and technology
<b>Z</b> names and grammar			

Figure 1. UCREL Semantic Analysis System<sup>16</sup>

- 9 As explained in section 3, we mostly focused on the following domain: M: movement, location, travel and transport.

## Results of previous study

- 10 In a previous study<sup>17</sup>, we analyzed and compared the lexical frequencies, positive and negative keywords, collocates, and semantic domains to see how Brexit was linguistically represented and constructed through the discourses of the three Conservative Prime Ministers. We performed a lexical analysis combined with a semantic analysis in order to get an overview of how language was used to conceptualize Brexit. The lexical analysis involved the elaboration of frequency lists so as to identify the most frequent lexical items for each Prime Minister, and the next step consisted in focusing on certain lexical items particularly relevant as regards the theme of our corpus: EU and UK/Britain-related terms, and then, more specifically: *Brexit*, *EU* and *UK*. Our analyses enabled us to reach the following conclusions:
- 11 Firstly, noteworthy variations were highlighted in David Cameron's, Theresa May's and Boris Johnson's speeches, but those variations were found more on the lexical level than on the semantic level, as the same semantic domains – Geographical Names, Location and Direction, and General Actions – are resorted to by the three Prime Ministers, even if the frequency may differ. Consequently, variations are found at the level of the word, of the lexis used more than at the level of the semantic domains, which remain pretty similar for the three Conservative Prime Ministers.
- 12 Secondly, the lexical and the semantic analyses brought out interesting differences, but they nonetheless remain complementary, as they confirm some tendencies: the theme of the EU as well as EU-related words are significantly more present at the lexical level in Cameron's and May's speeches than in Johnson's, probably because before the referendum, the place of the EU was at stake, whereas after the referendum, it was the future place and role of the UK that was mostly mentioned and became the focus of

interest. We also found that the relative frequency for Europe-related words followed a steady decline in the speeches of the successive three Prime Ministers – which was a trend that was expected – but that the relative frequency for UK/Britain-related words followed the same trend, which was something unexpected. Interestingly, the list of positive keywords in the speeches of the three Prime Ministers, i.e. the words with comparatively high frequency, showed that the number of EU-related words tended to decrease while the number of UK-related words tended to increase. Yet, this finding needs to be qualified because even if the number of shared collocates between *EU* and *UK* tended to decrease, the number of collocates with *EU* remained relatively higher than the number of collocates with *UK*.

- 13 Thirdly, the conceptualization and representation of Brexit, just like Brexit itself, remains unstable and has varied from 2015 to nowadays, following the political process leading to the official leave in January 2021. The collocates of the word *Brexit*, which are quite different for the three Conservative Prime Ministers, enabled us to shed light on the different ways it is conceptualized in their respective speeches. That is the reason why we decided to go deeper in the semantic analysis of the notional domains used by the three Prime Ministers, by focusing more particularly on the JOURNEY metaphor scenario, as we will now explain more thoroughly.

## Corpus semantic analysis: the BREXIT IS A JOURNEY metaphor scenario

- 14 To go deeper into this first study and qualitative approach, we resorted to the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS) available in WMatrix4<sup>®</sup> in order to uncover the most recurrent semantic domains in our corpus of interest. This system aims to tag each word in a given corpus with a specific semantic domain. Figure 2 displays a sample of the semantic domains that were statistically more frequent across our data. The column on the left corresponds to the name of the semantic tag, and the column on the right shows the semantic domain that matches the tag:

Tag	DAVID CAMERON Semantic domains	Tag	THERESA MAY Semantic domains	Tag	BORIS JOHNSON Semantic domains
Z5	Grammatical bin	Z5	Grammatical bin	Z5	Grammatical bin
Z8	Pronouns	Z8	Pronouns	Z8	Pronouns
Z2	Geographical names	A3+	Being	A3+	Being
A3+	Being	Z2	Geographical names	Z2	Geographical names
M6	Location and direction	T1.1.3	Future	Z99	Unmatched ("Brexit")
A1.1.1	General actions, making	A7+	Modality	M6	Location and direction
A7+	Modality	A1.1.1	General actions	A7+	Modality
M1	Moving, coming, going	G1.1	Government	A1.1.1	General actions
Z3	Proper nouns	Z3	Proper nouns	Z6	Negation
A9+	Getting, possession	M6	Location and direction	G1.1	Government
G1.1.1	Government	M1	Moving, coming, going	A9+	Getting
T1.1.3	Future	Z6	Negation	G1.2	Politics
Z6	Negation	A9+	Getting	Z3	Proper nouns
Z99	Unmatched	X7+	Wanting, desire, inspiration	N1	Numbers
S6+	Obligation	S6+	Obligation and necessity	Q2.2	Speech acts
Q2.2	Speech acts	S5+	Groups and affiliation		

- 15 Figure 2. Semantic Domains Sorted by Frequency

- 16 Most notional domains tagged by the semantic tagger are common to the three Prime Ministers; in our previous study we focused on three of these domains, which seem to



be significantly frequent in their speeches: **Geographical Names, Location and Direction** and **General Actions**.

- 17 For this study, we decided to focus only on the metaphors within the M semantic domain, and more particularly on the M1 sub-domain (*Moving, coming, going*) and the M6 sub-domain (*Location and direction*), as they were the most productive metaphorically-speaking in the three corpora. The M semantic domain includes prepositions, such as *beyond, forward, away from, outside of*, as well as verbs, such as *face, stand, leave, come back*, and nouns: *destination, directions*. The importance of this semantic field led various linguists (Charteris-Black, Morozova, Musolff, Silaški & Đurovic, etc.) to suggest that Brexit is principally conceived as a journey, a move from one point to another, as if Britain was literally exiting a place. According to CMT<sup>18</sup>, some conceptual domains, such as the JOURNEY domain, are used in order to conceptualize abstract notions, that is notions that cannot be mentally represented easily. A metaphor is therefore a mapping between a source domain, which is the concept area from which the metaphor is drawn (JOURNEY in our case) and a target domain, which is the concept area to which the metaphor is applied, the domain we want to conceptualize (BREXIT), as exemplified in (1) when Cameron conceptualizes Brexit as a path away from Europe via a double metaphor:

(1) CAM\_2016\_06\_24\_M1 Although **leaving** Europe was not the **path** I recommended, I am the first to praise our incredible strengths. I said before that Britain can survive outside the European Union and indeed that we could find a way.

- 18 Or in (2) when May conceptualizes Brexit as a “momentous journey” ahead of the British:

(2) MAY\_2017\_03M1 For as we face the opportunities ahead of us on this momentous **journey**, our shared values, interests and ambitions can and must bring us together.

- 19 Conceptualizing abstract notions as a journey is very frequent in English and in many other languages: LOVE (“We are at a crossroads in our relationship”), LIFE (“His life has taken a good course”), DEATH (“That’s the end of the road”), etc. Likewise, the use of words from the **Location and Direction** domain to talk about Brexit could be framed under the conceptual metaphor BREXIT IS A JOURNEY, which is a way to impose some mental structure on the fuzzy concept of Brexit. As such, more than a conceptual metaphor, we can talk of a whole metaphor scenario. According to Musolff<sup>19</sup>, metaphor scenarios

enable the speakers to not only apply source to target concepts but to draw on them to build narrative frames for the conceptualization and assessment of sociopolitical issues and to ‘spin out’ these narratives into emergent discourse traditions that are characteristic of their respective community.

- 20 Silaški & Đurovic<sup>20</sup> clearly demonstrated the ubiquity of the JOURNEY metaphor scenario in political discourse and more particularly in the Brexit discourse:

The JOURNEY metaphor is one of the conventional metaphors in political discourse in general and at the same time one of the most prevailing and recurrent metaphors underlying the Brexit discourse. It is actually “shorthand for a much more complex conceptual scenario that ultimately goes back to the metaphor PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999)” (Koller and Semino, 2009: 19-20), or more precisely PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS MOVING ON A PATH TOWARDS A DESTINATION metaphor (Lakoff, 1993).



- 21 Metaphors which draw from the JOURNEY conceptual domain are frequently found in political rhetoric. According to Silaški & Đurovic, the ubiquity of metaphors, and more particularly of journey metaphors in political speeches is due to the fact that metaphors “are a widespread tool for framing varied political issues”<sup>21</sup> and that they simplify abstract, difficult to grasp concepts by “enabling people to understand highly complicated phenomena and areas of experience in terms of more concrete ones”<sup>22</sup>, which are more likely to be clearly delineated<sup>23</sup>. Another fundamental reason for the ubiquity of this conceptual metaphor in political discourse is embodiment, as mentioned by Lakoff and Johnson<sup>24</sup>: movement is deeply rooted in the functioning of the human body. It is therefore no surprise that it enables speakers to conceptualize other abstract domains frequently. Finally, Musolff advocates that metaphors “must fit in with discourses already familiar to their recipients, so that they can be recognized as a basis for argumentative conclusions”<sup>25</sup>.
- 22 Not only are metaphors used to impose some sort of physical structure on abstract concepts that make up our daily life such as LOVE and LIFE, but they can also be chosen to depict an issue under a certain light. Henceforth the evaluative aspect of metaphors used in political discourse is inherent to conceptual metaphors, due to the highlighting-hiding principle: some elements of the concept are highlighted, and other aspects will necessarily be hidden<sup>26</sup>:
- The very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept, a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor.
- 23 For instance, the conceptual metaphor BREXIT IS A JOURNEY highlights the length of the process, the changes that will result from this process, and hides the fact that Britain will supposedly remain unchanged, or that Britain and the EU will remain close allies, although the nature of their relation will forever change. Consequently, metaphors are rarely neutral and they give us an insight into the mental representations of the speaker, hence their axiological or evaluative value, as reminded by Semino: “constructing something in terms of a particular concept often results in a particular viewpoint”<sup>27</sup>. Generally-speaking, JOURNEY metaphors are goal-oriented and highlight progress and direction<sup>28</sup>, henceforth their “strong tendency to promote positive axiology”, according to Zbierska-Sawala<sup>29</sup>, and the fact that they “always have pragmatic ‘added value’”, for example, to express an evaluation of the topic”<sup>30</sup>, which allows discourse producers to more or less reveal their value judgments. This claim is particularly relevant in the political domain. According to Charteris-Black, who carried out a study on the persuasive power of metaphors in political rhetoric, journey metaphors are usually used by politicians in order to imply that they have clear objectives in mind, that they know where they are going and where they want to lead the country:
- Journey metaphors in political communication typically refer to the predetermined objectives of policy. They imply having a clear idea in the mind of where one would like to be at some point in the future. Therefore, journeys imply some type of planned progress and assume a conscious agent who will follow a fixed path towards an imagined goal.<sup>31</sup>
- 24 Brexit ticks all the boxes, for it is both an abstract concept and a destination to be reached following an extensive process. To sum it up, JOURNEY metaphors to

conceptualize Brexit have both a conceptual, cognitive aim, but also an evaluative, axiological function.

- 25 Therefore, following a 2019 study by Silaški and Đurović<sup>32</sup> on the journey metaphor in Brexit-related political cartoons in which they study the visual JOURNEY metaphors used to conceptualize Brexit, we decided to analyze the verbal JOURNEY metaphors used to conceptualize Brexit in our corpus of speeches, to see if there were some differences. The findings of Silaški and Đurović's study for JOURNEY metaphors used to conceptualize Brexit in political cartoons are that the JOURNEY metaphor is very frequently used in political discourse on Brexit as it enables to "structure abstract concepts in familiar scenarios", and also reveals "underlying evaluations"<sup>33</sup>. In political cartoons, four mini-scenarios related to MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION are particularly productive and account for the majority of visual metaphorical representations: SHIP, DOUBLE-DECKER BUS, AIRPLANE and CROSSROADS. We will see that the scenarios are quite different in the speeches of the three Prime Ministers.
- 26 To reach our aim, the first step was to retrieve the JOURNEY-related metaphorical expressions. Thanks to WMatrix<sup>4</sup>, we focused on the semantic domain labeled M: **movement, location, travel and transport**, and more particularly on the M1 sub-domain (*Moving, coming, going*) and the M6 sub-domain (*Location and direction*), as they were the most productive metaphorically-speaking. We retrieved all the occurrences classified under these two domains, and only kept the occurrences referring to the UK leaving the EU and which were deemed metaphorical, be they lexicalized or non-lexicalized. Table 1 summarizes the number of occurrences for each Prime Minister (if a metaphorical expression was repeated identically in the same excerpt, it was counted only once):

	Cameron	May	Johnson
Total	34	54	26

Table 1. Raw numbers of metaphorical expressions

- 27 As the corpora are of different sizes, we normalized the figures using relative frequency, to be able to compare the metaphoricity for each Prime Minister; from the figures below, we can infer that May's speeches are more metaphorical in terms of JOURNEY metaphor scenarios than Cameron's and Johnson's, even if the difference is not paramount:

	Cameron	May	Johnson
	<b>64,606 tokens</b>	<b>67,474 tokens</b>	<b>50,169 tokens</b>
Total	0.052%	0.080%	0.052%

Table 2. Normalized percentages of metaphorical expressions

- 28 Each occurrence was then labelled according to the following principle: CAM\_2013\_01\_23\_M1, speech by David Cameron, dated 23 January 2013, retrieved from

the M1 category, MAY\_2016\_04\_25\_M6: speech by Theresa May, dated 25 April 2016, retrieved from the M6 category, JOH\_2018\_07\_18\_M1, speech by Boris Johnson, dated 18 July 2018, retrieved from the M1 category. The occurrences were then ordered chronologically for each Prime Minister, so as to be able to see if there were any variations in time for each speaker. JOURNEY metaphors are in bold fonts.

- 29 For each Prime Minister, we first focused on the degree of lexicalization of the metaphors used (lexicalized or vivid), then on the direction of the metaphor (forward, backward or no movement), and finally on the axiology / evaluation of the metaphors from the point of view of Britain's leaving the EU, by taking the entire discursive context into account, and more particularly the semantic prosody, i.e. "the way in which words that seem neutral can acquire positive or negative associations through frequent occurrences with particular collocations"<sup>34</sup>. For instance, all the underlined segments in occurrence (3) give a positive axiology to the excerpt:

(3) MAY\_2019\_03\_08\_M6 And take a decisive step toward the bright future that the British people voted for, and which you and our whole country deserve. Let's get it done. I have just come from chairing seven hours of Cabinet meetings focused on finding a route out of the current impasse one that will deliver the Brexit the British people voted for, and allow us to move on and begin bringing our divided country back together.

- 30 On the contrary, occurrence (4) is negatively loaded because of a negative semantic prosody:

(4) CAM\_2016\_02M1 Those who want to **leave** Europe cannot tell you if British businesses would be able to access Europe's free trade single market or if working people's jobs are safe or how much prices would rise. All they are offering is risk at a time of uncertainty - **a leap in the dark**.

- 31 Regarding the degree of lexicalization, the figures speak for themselves: the vast majority of JOURNEY metaphors used by the three Prime Ministers are clearly lexicalized: 94.12% for Cameron, 100% for May and 95.15% for Boris Johnson. This means that the Prime Ministers mostly resort to very conventional, entrenched metaphors, probably because the metaphors used are intended to simplify a very complex notion, which still needs defining. This could also be explained by the fact that the Prime Ministers mostly resort to orientational or ontological metaphors to conceptualize Brexit, and not to structural metaphors which are usually more creative.

#### Cameron

Lexicalization degree		Direction of journey metaphors			Evaluation of journey metaphors from the point of view of leaving the EU				
lexicalized	vivid	forward	backward	no movement	positive for the UK	positive for the EU	neutral	negative for the UK	negative for the EU
32	2	17	17	0	0	0	12	20	3
94.12%	5.88%	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%	35.3%	58.82%	8.82%

32 Cameron tends to conceptualize Brexit as the wrong path, as the axiology of his metaphors seems to confirm: no positive evaluation for Britain's leaving the EU, but 20 negative evaluations (58.82%) for the UK and 3 (8.82%) for the UE if this was to happen. In Cameron's speeches, the lexical metaphors from the JOURNEY source domain are often associated with a negative semantic prosody, through the use of derogatory lexical and grammatical items. He likens Brexit to a retreat, a movement which involves going backward. The definition provided by the *OED* is clearly negative: "The action or an act of falling back from a place or position, esp. after a defeat or when confronted by a superior force". Half of the occurrences (50%) are linked to a backward movement; culturally-speaking, going backwards is often perceived negatively, as opposed to going forward<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, the act of retreating is generally associated with negatively-connoted adjectives such as "dangerous", "hard", "wrong", "suspicious", "weaker", "restless", "irresponsible", "diminished", etc., negatively-connoted nouns such as "danger", "risks", "dark" or negatively-connoted verbs such as "fail", "shut off", "drift", etc.:

(5) CAM\_2014\_11M1 The second dangerous view is to think we can somehow pull up the drawbridge and **retreat** from the world, shutting off immigration altogether.

(6) CAM\_2013\_01\_23\_M1 The danger is that Europe will fail and the British people will **drift towards the exit**.

33 Adverbs and affixes expressing negation are also frequently found in the co-text, as if Brexit was *not* the path to follow:

(7) CAM\_2013\_01\_23\_M1 And it is hard to argue that the EU would not be greatly diminished by **Britain's departure**.

(8) CAM\_2016\_02M1

34 Those who want to leave Europe cannot tell you if British businesses would be able to access Europe's free trade single market or if working people's jobs are safe or how much prices would rise. All they are offering is risk at a time of uncertainty – **a leap in the dark**.

35 Besides, it is interesting to note that Cameron seems to amalgamate retreating from the EU and retreating from the world, as if leaving the EU would cut the UK from the whole world altogether, putting aside other potential allies such as the US, for instance. This could also be seen as a way to portray a catastrophic scenario, and highlight the drawbacks that leaving the EU will bring about. His frequent use of hypotheses (*if, conditional -ED verbs*) also pertains to creating an atmosphere of uncertainty should British citizens vote for Brexit. This is in keeping with Cameron's "leap in the dark" metaphor (already mentioned in (8)) which made headlines in the British press during the referendum campaign:

(9) CAM\_2016\_02\_22\_M1 This cannot be described as anything other than risk, uncertainty and **a leap in the dark** that could hurt working people in our country for years to come.

36 This lexical metaphor can be classified under the JOURNEY source domain, as leaping involves a movement. However, the prepositional phrase that characterizes this leap – "in the dark" – indicates that this movement has no clear-cut destination, the objective is not in sight. It is synonymous with uncertainty and taking risks, and this risk-taking is followed by the verb "hurt", which reinforces the idea that Cameron's conceptualization of Brexit is hurtful and dangerous. Thus, it stresses the uncertainty

of Brexit, and the potential dangers that could arise from the Brexit vote, through a clearly negative axiology.

- 37 The day after the referendum, on June 24, 2016, Cameron made his resignation speech at Downing Street. In this statement, he made it clear that he was not in tune with the result of the vote, through negations and oppositions:

(1) CAM\_2016\_06\_24\_M1 Although leaving Europe was not the path I recommended, I am the first to praise our incredible strengths. I said before that Britain can survive outside the European Union and indeed that we could **find a way**.

- 38 The verb “survive” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*<sup>36</sup> as follows: “To continue to live after the death of another, or after the end or cessation of some thing or condition or the occurrence of some event (expressed or implied); to remain alive, live on.” Even after the referendum campaign, Cameron stuck to his position and continued to picture Brexit as a hazard, which also justified his decision to resign. Besides, the use of the modal auxiliary “could” tends to convey the feeling that the possibility of finding a way amidst the darkness of Brexit is hypothetical, and Cameron does not seem convinced by Britain’s ability to survive and thrive outside the EU. Interestingly, it is only from the time the British voted for Brexit that the evaluation of Cameron’s metaphors changed, from negative to neutral, as if he wanted to avoid being held responsible for what was looming ahead, before he resigned and left the ship to Theresa May:

(10) CAM\_2016\_06\_24\_M6 I will do everything I can as Prime Minister to **steady the ship** over the coming weeks and months but I do not think it would be right for me to try to be **the captain that steers our country to its next destination**.

(11) CAM\_2016\_06\_24\_M6 But the British people have made a very clear decision to **take a different path** and as such I think the country requires fresh leadership to **take it in this direction**.

#### May

Lexicalization degree		Direction of journey metaphors			Evaluation of journey metaphors from the point of view of leaving the EU				
lexicalized	vivid	forward	backward	no movement	positive for UK	positive for EU	neutral	negative for UK	negative for EU
54	0	37	17	0	34	8	18	2	0
100%	0%	68.52%	31.48%	0%	62.96%	14.81%	33.33%	3.70%	0%

- 39 As opposed to David Cameron who saw Brexit as a retreat, Theresa May sees Brexit as a journey that will eventually lead the country forward, which the positive evaluation conveyed by the metaphors she uses are proof of (34 positive evaluations for the UK (62.96%), 8 for the EU (14.81%), 18 neutral evaluations (33.33%) and only 2 negative evaluations for the UK (3.70%)):

(12) MAY\_2018\_03\_02\_M1\_M6 We will not be buffeted by the demands to talk tough or threaten a walk out. Just as we will not accept the counsels of despair that this simply cannot be done. We will **move forward** by calm, patient discussion of each other’s positions.

(13) MAY\_2017\_12\_11\_M1 I know that some doubted we would reach this stage. The process ahead will not be easy. The progress so far has required give and take for the UK and the EU to **move forwards together**.

(14) MAY\_2018\_03\_02\_M6 But as we chart **our way forward** with the EU, I want to take a moment to look back.

40 Here, Theresa May favors optimism over Cameron’s despair by conceptualizing Brexit as “a move forward”, which is culturally seen as a positive move, a change for the better, and she stresses the collaborative dimension of the Brexit negotiations. By resorting to various oppositions, May proves that she wants to depict Brexit on the bright side: maybe the UK will exit the EU, but they will remain close allies and friends with Europe:

(15) MAY\_2016\_07\_21\_M1 Britain is **leaving** the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe and we are not walking away from our friendship with France, or any of our other European partners.

(16) MAY\_2017\_03M1 However, we **approach** these talks constructively, respectfully, and in a spirit of sincere co-operation.

41 Moving forward hand in hand with the EU seems to be of utmost importance for May:

42 In the same way, May’s JOURNEY metaphors also contribute to her portrayal as a strong leader who has confidence in her country and in her ability to negotiate with worldwide leaders at the European Parliament to serve Britain’s best interest. This is particularly relevant in occurrence (17), where the verb and the preposition “emerge from” convey the idea that although Britain is facing a difficult situation, the end of the crisis is in sight. All the more, this is followed by a series of comparatives, which reinforces her positive outlook on the situation:

(17) MAY\_2017\_01\_17\_M1 My answer is clear. I want this United Kingdom to **emerge from** this period of change stronger, fairer, more united and more outward-looking than ever before.

43 Nonetheless, when Theresa May officially announced her resignation on May 24, 2019, the evaluation of the metaphors she uses switches from positive to neutral:

(18) MAY\_2019\_05\_21\_M6 As part of the cross-party discussions the government offered a compromise option of a temporary customs union on goods only, including a UK say in relevant EU trade policy and an ability to change the arrangement, so a future government could **move** it in its preferred direction.

44 Or negative:

(19) MAY\_2019\_05\_21\_M6 We have worked hard to deliver that, but we have not yet managed it. I have tried everything I possibly can to **find a way through**.

45 This can be related to the difficult position in which she found herself in the course of her mandate, as she struggled to pass her bill in Parliament and make herself heard in Brussels.<sup>37</sup> Her optimism seems to be fading as she gradually glides towards the end of her mandate as Prime Minister.

Johnson

Lexicalization degree		Direction of journey metaphors			Evaluation of journey metaphors from the point of view of leaving the EU				
lexicalized	vivid	forward	backward	no movement	positive for UK	positive for EU	neutral	negative for UK	negative for EU

25	1	12	14	0	14	0	4	0	9
95.15%	3.85%	46.15%	53.85%	0%	53.85%	0%	15.38%	0%	34.61%

- 46 Johnson has always been in favor of Brexit, from the start, and this can be seen in the language he uses. The axiology of Johnson's metaphors is clearly positively connoted for the UK (20) and negatively-connoted for the EU (21), as the two following occurrences clearly show:

(20) **JOH\_2018\_10\_03\_M1** And the only way to win the future is not to **retreat** from the world, not to abandon globalisation but to play our part, as we always have, in making the world safer and freer and therefore more prosperous and that is why we must believe in global Britain.

(21) **JOH\_2016\_05\_09\_M6** Why? Because negotiating on behalf of the EU is like trying to ride a vast pantomime horse, with 28 people blindly pulling in different directions.

- 47 By comparing the EU to a “pantomime horse” through a creative, salient metaphor, Johnson is clearly mocking and caricaturing the EU institutions. It emphasizes the lack of leadership and the need for the UK to take the reins of its destiny.

- 48 Contrary to what could be expected – and this was a finding of our previous study – Johnson focuses on the EU to criticize the 27 remaining members and prove that leaving the EU was the right decision to make. Through negations (22) or dehumanizing mechanical metaphors (23), he insists upon the fact that the EU is heading in the “wrong direction”, which justifies the fact that the UK needs to take a different path, that of Brexit:

(22) **JOH\_2016\_05\_09\_M1** The answer is that the Remain campaign have no answers to any of these questions, because they are asking us to remain in an EU that is wholly unreformed and going in the wrong direction. If we leave on June 23, we can still provide leadership in so many areas.

(23) **JOH\_2016\_05\_09\_M6** The EU system is a ratchet hauling us ever further into a federal structure.

- 49 All in all, Johnson's representation of Brexit clearly diverges from his predecessors'. More than a “move forward”, Brexit is seen as an opportunity (24), and leaving the EU inspires dignity and respect (25), something to be proud of:

(24) **JOH\_2019\_10\_02\_M6** And let's get Brexit done on October 31<sup>st</sup>. Not just because we have such an immense agenda to **take this country forward** but because Brexit is an opportunity in itself.

(25) **JOH\_2018\_10\_02\_M1** So now therefore is the time truly to take back control and make the elegant dignified and grateful exit the country voted for.

- 50 By depicting Brexit as the “right path”, Johnson places himself as a supreme leader guiding Britain towards a brighter future and granting the UK an opportunity to recover some of its exceptionalism. This also corroborates with a previous study carried out by Bonnet, who found out that Vote Leavers depicted Britain's journey outside of the EU as the way towards a better destiny.<sup>38</sup>

- 51 With regards to these results, it is thus safe to argue that Cameron is more likely to use JOURNEY metaphors that are neutral or negatively connoted for the UK, while May is more likely to use JOURNEY metaphors that are neutral or positively connoted for the UK and the EU, and Johnson is more likely to use JOURNEY metaphors that are positively connoted for the UK and negatively connoted for the EU. To confirm our hypotheses



and assess the relationship between the following variables, *Prime Minister* and *evaluation of JOURNEY metaphors*, we performed a chi-square test of independence<sup>39</sup>, with the help of SPSS Statistics<sup>40</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the chi-square result ( $\chi^2 = 93.581$ ) is higher than the critical chi-square value<sup>41</sup>, with a significant *p-value* < 0.001. This statistical test shows that the two above variables are dependent<sup>42</sup>.

## Conclusion

- 52 If Brexit is a journey, the path that Britain must take to reach the exit from the EU is either seen as a risky track leading to a dark place, or a glorious path along which Britain will grow stronger and brighter. In this article, we aimed to analyze the use of the JOURNEY conceptual metaphor to depict Brexit in the speeches of Cameron, May and Johnson. To get a full grasp of how JOURNEY metaphors contributed to the conceptualization of Brexit, we retrieved all the metaphorical expressions drawing from this domain, and suggested an interpretation based on three criteria: the degree of lexicalization, directionality and evaluation – whether positive or negative – depending on the co-text and context of appearance.
- 53 Our findings suggest that David Cameron tends to depict Brexit as the wrong path for Britain, which is no surprise given the fact that he was a strong Remainer. Brexit is metaphorically depicted as a retreat, a risky track where Cameron does not want to be headed. Conversely, for Theresa May, Brexit appears to be the way forward, hence positively connoted. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that her perception of the journey to Brexit switches from a merry and friendly destination to a more neutral place as she announced her resignation. This can be explained by her difficulty to plan a route with a clear destination. Finally, and unsurprisingly, Boris Johnson’s perception of Brexit strongly contrasts with his opponents’. Our study shows that he uses JOURNEY metaphors in order to insist upon the fact that the EU is heading towards the wrong direction, hence the necessity for Britain to part from the EU and pursue its own journey to put the country back on track, in the right direction. This also contributes to the construction of Johnson’s ethos as a savior relieving Britain from what weighs it down by finally “getting Brexit done”.

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## NOTES

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- It is interesting to note that 50% of occurrences in the Cameron corpus however refers to a forward movement, which could be surprising; yet, they are either linked to negatively-connoted sentences (CAM\_2013\_01\_23: The danger is that Europe will fail and the British people will drift towards the exit) or to hypothetical situations (CAM\_2013\_01\_23: Mr Speaker, as we approach this choice let me be clear about 2 things. First, I am not arguing and I will never argue that Britain couldn't survive outside the European Union).
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41. The critical chi-square value is 15.50731306 ( $\alpha = 0.05\%$ ;  $df = 8$ ).
42. It should be noted that our calculations had 6 expected frequencies below 5. In that case, it is advised to perform an additional test, Fisher's Exact Test, to further verify the chi-square results. The results for Fisher's Exact Test were  $p < 0.001$ , thus confirming the strong relationship between the two observed variables. For further information, see Kim, H.-Y., "Statistical notes for clinical researchers: Chi-squared test and Fisher's exact test", *Restorative Dentistry & Endodontics*, 42(2), 2017, 152-155.
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## ABSTRACTS

From David Cameron, through Theresa May, to Boris Johnson, what Brexit means has evolved, linguistically speaking, but also conceptually speaking. It is mostly through discourse that this quite unfathomable concept came into being and slowly became a more stable notion in the British and European contexts. Thanks to corpus linguistics software tools together with cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis, this article seeks to follow the findings of a previous study on the perception of Brexit by Tories through an analysis of 92 speeches delivered by Tory Prime Ministers David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson. Following a quantitative and qualitative approach, the paper aims to analyze the BREXIT IS A JOURNEY metaphor scenario, and more particularly the direction of the movement and the evaluation of the metaphor scenarios resorted to by the three Conservative Prime Ministers.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Brexit, David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, journey metaphor, semantic analysis, direction, evaluation

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