

## Weaving a narrative of historical continuity in pro-LEAVE British tabloids

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the discourse of British pro-Brexit tabloids in the build-up to the 2016 referendum. The research carried out within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis and Historical Discourse analysis has revealed that the pro-LEAVE newspaper campaign was retrospective by nature and exploited the British nostalgia for the glorious past that involved Britain's global economic, political and cultural domination. By doing so, the media encouraged in the audience the idea of historical continuity and, by doing so, reconceptualized the EU and recontextualized the 2016 referendum.

**Keywords:** *Brexit, discourse, narrative, (re)conceptualization, (re)contextualization.*

**Introduction.** In 1975, the European Communities Membership referendum held in the UK retained the country in united Europe for decades to come with 67% of the British convinced that European single market would solidify the increasingly declining economy by unlimited access to the European Common Market. However, the majority of British votes in the 2016 Referendum gave the word to leave the EU, an unexpected decision that dispatched a shuddering dissatisfaction to the European as well as the British political elite.

The relationship with the EU was of secondary importance of the British voters for many years prior to the campaign of the striking referendum but the question of European Community, and then after Union, has been always the most disputable issue in the British politics since WW II and remained pivotal for the British newspapers' nationalistic political agenda. Brexit is seen as "markedly complex to read and comprehensive interpretations are hard to draw" [24, p. 2], but a closer look at the British historical construction of the European question will reveal a nationalistic nostalgia of the glorious past of a 'single nation' and its 'global imperial ideology' that gave a propulsive affect towards Brexit. This ideology inherited by the British was skillfully played on by the most popular national newspapers and secured the LEAVE decision.

**The goal.** The study analyses the discourse of UK's pro-LEAVE newspapers in promoting the nationalistic ideology throughout the 2016 campaign from February 20 when the British government announced the referendum up to the day of referendum itself June 23. The article attempts to develop a theoretical foundation for further research into contextualization and conceptualization of Brexit in newspaper publications.

**Materials and Methods.** The material of the research consists of editorials as well as articles (total number 120) published during the period of referendum campaign (February – June 2016) in the four leading daily pro-Brexit newspapers: The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, The Sun, The Telegraph.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) [6; 8; 9], the conceptual history framework [34; 38] and Discourse-Historical Analysis (DHA) [20] have provided the researcher with the inventory to consider how the newspapers honed their discourses in representing and processing the public debate as well as topics and narratives upon which the public discourse revolved. The focus is particularly put on intertextuality, modality, vocabulary, selectivity, representation

and legitimation. The key texts are considered and compared to each other, exploring how the newspapers handled the issues through the language they used, paying attention to the contexts of the dates with the presented content.

**A brief review of publications on the subject.** The Brexit discourse and its implications have drawn an increasingly growing number of studies ranging from analysing the causes of Brexit and its consequences (see, for example, [10] to encompassing the Brexit phenomenon and its 'hegemonic mode of discourse' in the British public opinion [32]. Some scholars have touched on the role of media and their representation, construction and (re)generation of the public discourse in the national and international context [16; 22]. Others use the Brexit phenomenon to consider the dialectic between cosmopolitanism and transnationalism [14; 28].

However, these studies focus on a short-term perspective and their focus is on electoral and vote analysis. This article aims at filling in the lacuna, namely at showing how the pro-LEAVE nationalistic newspaper discourse is linked to the British past, how it managed to recontextualize historical narratives and to strengthen the current ideology of exceptionalism.

**Results and discussion.** British discourse on the European project has always been uneasy and uncomfortable [4; 11; 25]. Moreover, it has been for decades sceptical and accumulating a hegemonic antagonism towards Europe, which provides a solid foundation to the claim that Brexit discourse should not be viewed as a temporary process but rather as one of long hegemonic power over the British public sphere and, thus, a (re)contextualization of the ideological Anglosphere within the political discourse of the Brexit referendum itself. This linkage and recontextualization of the traditional historical narratives can be seen as "a process of creating new horizontal discourse orderings and a new hegemony of discursive frames" [20, p. 314].

To understand this historical construction of the European question in the British debate and its 'recontextualization' within the public discourse during the referendum campaign, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) as well as historical discourse analysis (HDA) approaches are to be mapped for this study.

First, a critical discourse analysis is used to deconstruct the discursive construction of language of power and hegemony (in the Gramscian sense); that means "the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates" [7, p.112]. This entails an ideological

redescription of the nation which can only be successful if it manages to win over “the hearts and minds of the majority of ordinary people” and enters their daily lives as a material and ideological force [12, p.6].

The most relevant for this study is the language means used to gain hegemony. Gramsci, for example, emphasises that laypeople’s spontaneous philosophy is constructed in language, common sense which includes certain beliefs of conceptualizing the world (Ives, 2004. cited in [21, p. 193]). The language is defined by the scholar as “a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content” (ibid). Within the framework of CDA, discourse in its turn is defined as something “more than just language use: it is language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice” [8, p.28] where language is not neutral and “all texts are critical sites for the negotiation of power and ideology” [3, p. 138]. The main concern of CDA is not necessarily the use of language as such but rather with the way language is used to and hence to expose a relationship between the text and its social conditions, ideologies and power relations utilized by these newspapers and thus to study their linguistic and lexical choices used to impose their agenda on reader’s minds. Therefore, CDA is unavoidable for a researcher to understand how British newspapers use language to ‘shape’ the ‘common sense’ and, by doing so, to shape their audience’s conceptualization of Brexit.

Historical Discourse Analysis (HDA), helps “to investigate how the discursive construction of national and transnational “identity politics” draws on collective and individual memories, on hegemonic and common sense narratives” [38, p.57]. For Reisigl & Wodak (2009: 89) texts “are parts of discourses”, whereas discourses have different characteristics: they are (a) “socially constituted and socially constitutive” [39, p. 90] and (b) “related to a macro-topic”, which “allows for many sub-topics: ‘unemployment’ thus covers sub-topics like ‘market’, ‘trade unions’, ‘social welfare’ [...] and many more” [37, p.66]. Consequently, when analysing discourse on Brexit, its linkage to other discourses and topics should be taken into consideration, i.e. ‘migration’, ‘economy’ ‘single market’, ‘single nation’ ‘national identity’ etc.

In addition, the context of speech delivery is of highly importance. Wodak and Reisigl refer to four levels of context considered in discourse historical analyses and specify the third and the fourth levels as “specific context of situation” and “broader socio-political and historical context” respectively [39, p.93]. These contexts embed discursive practices. Therefore, reconceptualizing the historical categories of the UK-EU relations and national tabloids’ enduring skepticism shall help to understand Brexit and its recontextualized discourse of Anglosphere as an already-ideologized ‘common sense’ in the British public opinion.

The increasing conceptualization of contemporary public discourse needs to hybridize the theoretical and analytical apparatus of CDA with a concept-oriented historical method [24, p. 2]. Recontextualization is one of the “salient linguistic processes governing historical change which is concretely manifested in the intertextuality and interdiscursivity of texts” [38] and is often “textually realized in the mixing of “new” recontextualized elements and “old” elements, such as particular words, expressions, arguments, topoi, rhetorical devices and so forth, and discourses and

genres [38, p.61].

As Maccaferri points out, the recontextualization and intertextual and discursive reconstruction of historical narratives is no random process in re/shaping the political public sphere but rather “a selective reproduction” of discourses and a “self-replicating process: it has decontextualized some concepts, rearranged and reshaped other elements in order to craft (new) strategic hierarchies and ideologies” [24, p.4]. Hence, during their ‘recontextualization’, especially during the 2016 referendum campaign, some discourses lost their primary function and became a new signifier for a new hegemonic discourse [20]. Thus, “when analysing narratives about past events, a systematic investigation of context-dependent layers of debate proves valuable” (Heer et.al., 2008 cited in [38, p. 62]).

Moreover, in order to investigate the relationship between the nationalistic discourse of Brexit and British pro-Brexit tabloids, we need to understand some “meanings”, i.e. “floating signifiers which are overflowing with possibility for *meaning*” [33, p.26-27]. It is these meanings that create “an established dominance in society which can persuade, or dissuade, political motivations” [31, p.29]. Broadcasting such discourses and associating their broad interpretations to social “truths” helps to reshape the audience.

While studying newspaper data, it is also important to put articles and events they recount into context, since news narratives do not exist in isolation and are effectively written into the continuum of issues, events and beliefs that surround them [2]. One should also be mindful of its modality, i.e. ways in which language is used to encode meanings such as degrees of certainty and commitment, or alternatively vagueness and lack of commitment, personal beliefs versus generally accepted knowledge or knowledge taken for granted [26, p. 41].

‘Isolationism’ and ‘uniqueness’ of Great Britain has its ideological dimension in the British collective memory; the Victorian sense of “splendid isolation” was extensively reinforced by the experiences of World War II [Harrison, 2009, cited in [24, p. 3]]. Britain and Europe’s common history involved two World Wars in the space of three decades. Brussels’ hegemony would always rankle with the British since the Brits didn’t defeat Germany in World War II only to have Germany control the British economy decades later. The “splendid isolationism” of the “unique island” also has a psychological connection with the concept of Anglosphere. Due to its colonial heritage with a “traditionally global perspective”, its “sporadic antagonism” with France, its “increasing affiliation” with the USA and global relation with the Commonwealth countries, Britain found it rather difficult to narrow down its political interests only to Europe [30, p.192; 18, p. 4].

The UK joined the EU primarily for economic reasons at the time of major difficulties [18, p. 4]. This became one of the key points of the pro-Brexit political and journalistic discourse. According to Boris Johnson, one of the pro-Brexit leaders, the “post-imperial future” was “sold to the people purely as a common market, a way of maximizing trade” but “then came the gradual realization that this was a very different agenda, an attempt not just at economic but political integration of a kind that the British people had never bargained for” [27]. The EU’s demand for a greater political, social and monetary union was met with increasing discontent amongst the political classes as well as the

general public who, as a consequence, did not associate the entry with an improvement of their living standard or overall situation and hence did not develop a positive attitude to the EEC [18, p.4; 30, p. 250]. Reynolds summarized Britain's entry to the EU a couple of decades before Brexit by saying that "late-sixties Britain [...] was pervaded by a sense of 'decline' (...) Rebuffed by the continentals, dependent on America, shorn of empire...with the economy in disarray... With this constrained belated arrival, Britain rather than forming the organization as a founding member, was left to negotiate the terms of accession "from a position of weakness" and "all that was left for Britain seemed to be nostalgia" which "did not prove advantageous" [30, p. 233, 238].

However, the steady rise of Euroscepticism was launched by Thatcher and her cabinet during the 1980s. The implicit scepticism has gradually evolved into an explicit antagonism to Europe in the British debate. The expansion of the EU into Eastern Europe, and growing levels of immigration developed fundamental concerns over shared sovereignty and national identity violated by 'outsiders'. Daddow argues in his analysis of Prime Ministerial speeches on European policy that this 'outsider tradition' has consistently shaped the government's position within the EU, and no "British leader since 1973 has ever...attempted seriously to challenge the strong notion of outsiderliness underpinning Britain's status as a reluctant partner in the organisation" [5, p. 85].

These nostalgic sympathies of Brexiters have shaped their mental picture of world and their vote was certainly underpinned by a melancholic longing for a glorious past [40]. However, nostalgia in such a context, in the hands of ideologues, is not only a state of mind, it is a political weapon. It is not only that the propertied Victorians "considered their country to be the greatest power that the world had ever seen and expected that status to be maintained" [29, p. 387]. What is more important, this narrative started to reconceptualize Europe as "a soft-Nazi superstate" and to develop the narrative of "the imaginary existential struggle between the gallant English Resistance and the 'Euroreich'" [27].

This new perception of the EU as "imaginary invader" has been deepened and solicitously played upon by the British pro-Brexit press as a matter of reality. The EU of 2016 was different from the EEC that Britain had joined in 1975 since it was depicted as "new German invasion, cloaked in the guise of peaceful cooperation" [27]. The political discourse of Boris Johnson, in this sense, was essentially ideological when he told *The Telegraph* on 14 May 2016, a month before the referendum, that "Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried this -unifying Europe -and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods". He added that the EU was "pursuing a similar goal to Hitler in trying to create a powerful superstate" but "fundamentally what is lacking is the eternal problem, which is that there is no underlying loyalty to the idea of Europe [17].

What Boris Johnson expressed is actually inherited in the classical nationalistic thought pattern of British anti-Europeans: for them, the EU is a continuation in another, more insidious form, of the continent's previous attempts at domination. The ideological discourse of the "imaginary invader and dominator" and "the vertiginous fall from "the heart of the Empire" to "an occupied colony" was crucial to

Brexit discourse: "The moment of greatest triumph – the defeat of the Nazis – can be reimagined as the moment of greatest humiliation – defeat by the Nazis. The pain of colonization and defeat can, in the context of uneasy membership of the EU, be imaginatively appropriate [27]. This message was explicitly expressed by Boris Johnson who claimed that "we are on the verge of signing up for something even worse than the current constitutional position. These are the terms that might be enforced on a colony" [17]. This discourse explains in a nutshell the Leave press identification of the polling day as the 'Independence Day'.

This reconceptualization of historical categories was thus developed by the Brexit nostalgic discourse of the Leave press starting from the narratives of the "British exceptionalism" in contrast to the other continental European "nationalisms" which are more tied up with each other [13], to the category of "British political tradition" [36] and not ending with the category of pride that plays upon Britain's wartime efforts and achievements in its sole fight against dominating Germany [24, p. 9; 40]. Binding these narratives together, the Leave press developed the long standing discourse about "the legacy of the splendid isolation" of Great Britain [24, p. 9]. Based on the historical empire legacy, this discourse was utilized during the referendum of Brexit and resulted from the ongoing ideological struggle between a Britain which stood for constitutionalism, law, inclusiveness, conscience and humanitarianism, and various continental regimes – usually autocratic, sometimes republican – which were threatening and 'un-English'.

**Conclusions.** The article showcases that selective reproduction of historical narratives and discourses is a self-replicating process: it decontextualizes some concepts, rearranges and reshapes other elements in order to craft (new) strategic hierarchies and ideologies [24, p.4]. Thus, recontextualizing the Anglosphere into the Brexit discourse during the referendum campaign, hence, is an evoking articulation of the ideological nationalistic sentiment rooted in the past. This constant (re)construction of the 'depend on history' narratives shaped the reason for the British reluctance to accept their "dual identity (i.e. British and European)" to the extent that some considered the Leave campaign was "comparable to Nazi propaganda and just straightforwardly racist" [23]. As Tharoor states, "for the Brits themselves, shaping a national story that centers around the war against the Nazis — rather than the empire — makes psychological sense. It has allowed Britain to nurture a national self-image as champions of freedom and plucky underdogs... rather than imperialist oppressors" [35]. This nostalgic sentiment of the Brexiters was expressed by Boris Johnson, a former UK foreign secretary reincarnated as a *Daily Telegraph* columnist, who wrote that the Brexit dream is "not to build a new empire – heaven forbid - but to use every ounce of Britain's power, hard and soft, to go back out into the world in a way that we had perhaps forgotten over the past 45 years" [1].

The pro-Brexit public discourse therefore evolved in the atmosphere of increased English nationalism combined with a prominence of Eurosceptic thought and resistance to neglect the concept of Anglosphere – the Commonwealth alliance of English speaking peoples. The discourse was based on the antagonism to continental Europe and the glorious victory in WW II that necessitated and justified the

narrative of transplanting Britain's sovereignty back from the EU whose major player was Germany.

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