Chosen Keywords in the Discourse of British Politicians on Brexit: A Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract. The aim of the article was to select and analyze keywords concerning central Brexit-related themes found in chosen speeches delivered in the years 2013–2021 by politicians from three British parties: the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Brexit Party. The decision regarding Brexit had been made as a result of the referendum in which a slight majority of British citizens had voted for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to leave the EU. Via a pragmatic analysis conducted with the help of the program AntConc on a sample of one hundred transcripts of chosen speeches from sources such as the official UK government website and media websites, two keywords that played a crucial role in the discourse on Brexit were chosen, namely *leave* and *remain*. They appeared in the speeches of members of all three parties mentioned above. In their rhetorical and persuasive speeches delivered before the referendum, the politicians tried to convince the British society to support Brexit or be against it. In their speeches given after the referendum, they accented, e.g., that the decision made by the majority of the voters needs to be honoured.

Keywords: Brexit; political speeches; pragmatics; discourse analysis.

Introduction

Ruth Wodak (2010, p. 330) explains that studies in the field of language and politics are concerned with the discourse of politicians, with how politics is spoken about and depicted in the media, and with the models of communication that are present in political organizations. Moreover, as pointed out by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson (2000, p. 4), political discourse regards the formal exchange of views based on reasoning, as a result of which different actions should be taken in order to solve a given social issue. This discourse is to engage all the citizens in making a decision. It should also convince others with the help of true information and logic and explain which action would be the

most appropriate when solving the given issue. Political discourse is a way of making decisions in a democratic country (Johnson, Johnson, 2000, p. 4).

A topic that aroused many strong positive and negative emotions in the United Kingdom[1] was the issue of Brexit. In the discourse on this matter, certain politicians firmly supported the idea of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union after over forty years of membership[2], while others strongly criticized it. Some members of the British parties did not present a clear stance on the issue.

It should be noticed that actually the noun *Brexit* should be an element of the discourse about the United Kingdom remaining in the European Union or leaving it, and this was the case, as the following analysis will demonstrate. However, it is also important to underscore that this abbreviation became the dominating element of the communicative sphere encompassing the Brexit issue as a distinctive synonym of the "leave – remain" antinomy. *Brexit* was, thus, not merely one of many elements of the discourse on this topic. Politicians, therefore, began referring to the said antinomy via the perspective set by the word *Brexit*, which is itself indeed characteristic due to the elements from which it is derived, as it refers to the exit of the United Kingdom (Britain) from the structures of the European Union (Dictionary.com). This noun is a short form of the expression "British exit" (The Economic Times). It can, thus, be seen that nearly from the very beginning, the discourse was marked from the perspective of one side of the conflict.

The goal of the study described in this article was to select and analyze chosen keywords referring to significant themes present in the discourse of British politicians on Brexit. The analysis also included the content in which these words appeared as well as the linguistic devices used in it. For this aim given utterances were cited from the analyzed speeches of the politicians and on their basis the keywords and the content and language of these quotations were analyzed. This allowed for a deeper pragmatic analysis.

For the purpose of the study, chosen speeches of politicians from the following three British parties were selected from electronic sources: the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Brexit Party (now called "Reform UK"). The first two parties are the main ones in the United Kingdom, whereas the third one had been established for the very purpose of bringing Brexit about (The Brexit Party).

The material for the study was excerpted, e.g., from official media websites and from the UK government website. Moreover, own transcripts of speeches by Brexit Party politicians were created, as ready texts of their speeches were not easily available. A total of one hundred transcripts was investigated. The program AntConc, created by Laurence Anthony, was used for this aim (Anthony, 2020).

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[1] The full name of this multicountry structure is the *United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*. In everyday language, the names *the United Kingdom* or *Great Britain* are used. More information on this topic can be found here: Cunningham, J. M., n. d. *What's the Difference Between* (see reference list for full title and other bibliographic information on this and subsequent sources). In this article, the short form *the United Kingdom* will be used.

[2] More on the UK leaving the EU after over forty years of membership (Vernon, 2020; Piper, 2020).

IV. Research by Young Scientists / Jaunųjų mokslininkų tyrimai / Badania młodych naukowców

P. Kubicha. Chosen Keywords in the Discourse of British Politicians on Brexit: A Pragmatic Analysis

The article consists of three parts. The first one is dedicated to a short overview of Brexit and to the stances of British politicians on this issue. The second part describes the investigated material and the methodology used for conducting the analysis, and the third part presents the analysis itself and the results.

1. Brexit in the United Kingdom

In 2010 David Cameron, who was the leader of the coalition between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats at that time, became the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and had to withstand pressure from the UK Independence Party and from Eurosceptics from his own Conservative Party who demanded a referendum concerning the further membership of the United Kingdom in the European Union. Thus, in 2013 he finally promised a referendum if the Conservatives won the elections in 2015. Because his party did win, with an absolute majority, the referendum was held (The Economic Times).

Some politicians, such as David Cameron, were against Brexit in the Conservative Party. The Labour Party did not work out a clear stance on the matter. As the main oppositional party, it initially adopted a rather anti-Brexit stance, but finally accepted Brexit. Strong support for Brexit was demonstrated by the Brexit Party (TheJournal.ie), which was launched in April 2019 (The Brexit Party).

As stated by Andrew Glencross (2016, pp. 8–9), the British people took part in a referendum already in 1975, two years after the United Kingdom had joined the European Economic Community. At that time, two-thirds of the participants, with a turnout of 65%, had voted to stay in the community.

When referring to Brexit, Glencross (2016, p. 8) mentions the issue of British Euroscepticism. He underlines that the debate on Europe in the UK differs from the one led according to the Western European tradition. He points out, e.g., that the United Kingdom had not decided to adopt the Euro currency or join the agreement on the open Schengen zone. The reasons for the decision to hold the 2016 referendum should be explored with regard to Britain's historic strive for political and economic individuality. The author believes that the very fact that there was a call for the referendum was a sign of the British people's exceptional way of perceiving this issue based on the belief that the United Kingdom can leave the federalization-oriented European Union without suffering any harmful consequences (Glencross, 2016).

In this context, it is worth mentioning James Callaghan, British Foreign Secretary, who oversaw the repeated negotiations concerning the membership of the United Kingdom in the European Economic Community before the referendum, which was held in the year 1975. Callaghan treated the EEC as a business agreement, and it was his attitude towards the consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of joining forces with other European countries that affected British politics in 2016 (Wall, 2013; Glencross, 2016).

The decision for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union was made as a result of the referendum held on June 23, 2016 (GOV.UK). 51.9% of the participants of the referendum voted to leave the European Union, whereas 48.1% voted to remain in

it. In England (53.4% : 46.6%) and Wales (52.5% : 47.5%) the majority of the voters supported the option to leave the European Union, while in Scotland (38.0% : 62.0%) and Northern Ireland (44.2% : 55.8%) the supporters of Brexit lost. As the results indicate, the greatest discrepancy in the voting could be observed in the case of Scotland (BBC).

2. The research material and methodology

A total of one hundred transcripts of speeches given by politicians from the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Brexit Party were investigated. Forty-eight of the speeches had been delivered by members of the governing Conservative Party (thirteen before the referendum and thirty-five after the referendum), thirty-eight by representatives of the Labour Party (eight before the referendum and thirty after the referendum), i.e., the second most popular British party after the Conservatives, and fourteen of the speeches had been given by members of the Brexit Party, which had been launched nearly three years after the referendum. Thus, only post-referendum speeches of representatives of the latter party were analyzed. All of the investigated speeches were delivered in the years 2013–2021. The materials come from the electronic sources of the following websites: the government website *GOV.UK*, the repositories *British Political Speech* and *American Rhetoric: Online Speech Bank*, the website *Labour* belonging to the Labour Party, the pro-Brexit websites *Vote Leave* and *BrexitCentral*, the media websites *ConservativeHome*, *LabourList*, *Time*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *PoliticsHome*, *The New York Times*, *The Spectator*, and *Evening Standard*, the website *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, and the website *Policy Exchange* led by researchers from the United Kingdom who promote ideas concerning, for instance, social and economic development.

Due to the limited availability of ready transcripts of speeches by politicians from the Brexit Party, most of the analyzed transcripts of their speeches were written by the author of this article on the basis of recordings of the speeches from the official channels "Brexit Party MEPs", "The Sun", and "Guardian News" from the YouTube Internet site. A transcript of the last speech delivered by Nigel Farage in the European Parliament was created based on subtitles from the film with this speech (Farage, 2019b[3]) available on the BBC website. All the materials for analysis were chosen from the mentioned Internet sites due to the formal character of these sources.

Materials primarily made it possible to find Brexit speeches delivered after the referendum. For this reason more post-referendum than pre-referendum speeches were analyzed; nevertheless, despite this difference, the investigation of the materials allowed to achieve the overall aim of the study. Moreover, the easier access to the post-referendum texts can signal how significantly the discussion on Brexit had developed after the referendum.

The program "AntConc" (version 3.5.9), which allows for the investigation of written texts, was used for the analysis. It helps, for instance, in conducting statistical studies,

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[3] The full title and other bibliographic information on this and other analyzed speeches are provided in the list of sources.

e.g., in counting the frequency of given words and expressions in a text, as well as in investigating characteristics of the context in which the words and expressions appear. To analyze a given text in "AntConc" it needs to be saved as a plain text file and uploaded into the program. The frequency of a given word or phrase can be counted with the help of the Concordance Tool. Then, those fragments of the text appear in which the word or phrase can be found. Thus, the context can be viewed. The function File View is also very helpful, as the whole text can be displayed in this function, and thus, a greater part of the context can be seen. The Concordance Tool also enables studying more than one text at a time. Then, the results for all the texts appear concurrently, and therefore, the sum of the frequency of a word or phrase present in them. The results achieved by using these two AntConc tools served to conduct a qualitative pragmatic analysis of the speeches.

3. Keywords in the discourse on Brexit

The following subsection is dedicated to the conducted analysis of two (due to the limit of the length of the article) keywords that refer to significant Brexit-related issues of the investigated speeches. These words are *leave* and *remain*.

The aim of the investigation was to determine how politicians from the three parties used the mentioned keywords in the Brexit context. The objects of analysis were pre-referendum and post-referendum speeches. Because the Brexit Party had been launched in the year 2019, only those speeches of its members which were given after the referendum were analyzed.

3.1 Leave as a sign of antinomy

As the program AntConc indicated, the word *leave* appeared three hundred forty times in the analyzed speeches, mainly in the context of leaving the EU. In the speech by the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron, delivered on May 9, 2016 (Cameron, 2016), i.e., before the referendum, the word *leave* appeared as many as nineteen times and the word *leaving* seven times. Cameron used them in a negative context when he was, e.g., describing the undesirable effects of leaving the European Union. He strongly accented the economic aspect, underscoring that his country's economy will suffer if Brexit is carried out. Moreover, he evaluated the possibility of leaving the EU as a source of uncertainty, saying: *If we leave, the only certainty we will have is uncertainty*.

Also, Theresa May spoke negatively on Brexit during her speech from April 25, 2016 (May, 2016b). She used the word *leave* ten times, mainly referring to the potential undesired consequences that leaving the EU could bring about. She said, among other things: *So, if we do vote to leave the European Union, we risk bringing the development of the single market to a halt, we risk a loss of investors and businesses to remaining EU member states driven by discriminatory EU policies, and we risk going backwards when it comes to international trade*. Thus, similarly to Cameron, May also showed her concern for the state of the UK economy after an eventual Brexit. It should also be noticed that

she used the expression *we risk* three times in the cited example. This underscored the politician's then negative stance on Brexit even more strongly. In a similar context, May used the word *leaving* five times in this speech. Nevertheless, she noticed that remaining in the EU could also bring certain risks; she said: *And there are risks in staying as well as leaving*. When speaking of the risks of staying, she referred to her concern. As an EU member state (which had not decided to adopt the euro), the UK may be discriminated against due to the further integration of countries belonging to the Eurozone.

Before the referendum, also the voice of Boris Johnson could be heard in the Conservative Party. As opposed to Cameron and May, he showed his support for Brexit. In his speech delivered on May 9, 2016 (Johnson, 2016), he used the word *leave* ten times. He underlined his strong stance for leaving the EU by saying, for instance: *We need to Vote Leave on June 23, and in the meantime we must deal with the three big myths that are peddled by the Remain campaign*. He called arguments of the supporters of staying in the EU myths: accepting the loss of political independence for economic profits, "peace in Europe" associated with seventy years of stability in the EU, and that in reality one cannot want to leave the EU without being anti-European and that, thus, those opting to remain have a monopoly for liberal cosmopolitanism. Therefore, as opposed to Cameron and May, Johnson did not believe that leaving the EU would be economically disadvantageous for the United Kingdom. Moreover, in his speech, Johnson (2016) used the word *leaving* once when referring to the third argument of the supporters of remaining in the EU. He said: *Above all – to get to the third key point of the Remainers – if we leave the EU we will not, repeat not, be leaving Europe*.

The words *leave* and *leaving* appeared in the speeches of the politicians also after the referendum. Theresa May, already as the next prime minister from the Conservative Party, in her speech delivered approximately three months after the referendum (May, 2016a), used the words *leave* (four times) and *leaving* (four times) generally in a positive sense, as in the utterance: *We are leaving to become, once more, a fully sovereign and independent country – and the deal is going to have to work for Britain*. Thus, after the referendum, May began speaking about *leaving* the EU as a way for regaining sovereignty, as a chance for the United Kingdom, and not as a threat to the country.

In his speech on August 27, 2019 (Farage, 2019c), the Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage used the word *leave* five times, including four times in the context of leaving the EU. He also used the word *leaving* three times. For instance, he said: *I'm pleased that Boris Johnson is saying we will leave on the 31st of October, do or die*. Thus, also Farage, as the leader of a party striving for Brexit, used this word in a positive sense. The politician underscored that he expects as quick as possible exit from the EU. When the speech was being delivered, October 31st was a date in the near future. An essential element was also the expression *do or die*, with the help of which Farage cited Boris Johnson, who had ensured that Brexit would be delivered by October 31st (Channel 4 News, 2019). This colloquialism additionally underlined the significance of this date.

Furthermore, the utterance contained the personal pronouns *I* and *we*. By using them, Farage established contact with his audience. Via *I* he indicated himself, and hence built his

authority, and via *we*, he referred to the whole British society, thus identifying himself with it. These linguistic devices served as essential persuasive elements, helping the politician convince his listeners of what he was saying. *Leave* appeared in Farage's speech also in a negative sense in the utterance: *Despite all the fine words, it would leave us under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice for a minimum period of eight years*. In this case, it was used in reference to the agreement on the terms of Brexit, which, according to Farage, was harmful to the UK.

Another member of the Brexit Party, namely David Bull, in his speech on November 14, 2019 (Bull, 2019), used *leave* eleven times, e.g., in: *We voted to leave. We haven't left. That is not acceptable*. He, thus, clearly underscored that he strongly supports Brexit and that he is unsatisfied with the fact that it has not yet been delivered. Also, Annunziata Rees-Mogg from the Brexit Party showed her dissatisfaction with this matter. On April 12, 2019 (Farage, 2019a) she used the word *leave* once in: *We must fight that fight, we must win the fight, and we must leave for a greater future and better politics*. In this utterance, she underscored her determination in working towards Brexit, which she particularly emphasized with the help of repetition in *We must fight that fight, we must win the fight*.

In turn, the then leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, used the word *leave* in a negative sense in his speech delivered not long before the referendum (Corbyn, 2016b). It appeared in his speech a total of ten times, in reference to leaving the EU, e.g., in the utterance: *A Vote to Leave is a vote to put our NHS in jeopardy, in the hands of those who want to break it up to end it as a service free at the point of use*. The metaphorical expression *to put our NHS in jeopardy, in the hands of those who want to break it up*, strongly underscored the politician's negative stance on leaving the EU. Corbyn underlined that this would be harmful to the National Health Service. In his speech from February 26, 2018 (Corbyn, 2018), the politician also used the word *leave* ten times, mainly in reference to Brexit. Although he used it, among other things, to express his dissatisfaction about leaving the EU, he also used it simply to refer to the decision of leaving the EU, as in the utterance: *Our message has been consistent since the vote to leave 20 months ago. We respect the result of the referendum*. Corbyn signalized here that he consents to the decision of the majority of the voters to leave the EU, although his upper mentioned speech given before the referendum had a negative tone in the context of Brexit. While in that speech the word *leaving* did not appear, in the speech from 2018, it appeared seven times, each time in the context of Brexit, as in the utterance: *We are leaving the European Union but we will still be working with European partners in the economic interests of this country*. In this way, the politician underscored his openness towards cooperation with the EU after Brexit.

The word *leave* also appeared, e.g., in the speech by another member of the Labour Party, i.e., that of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the shadow cabinet Emily Thornberry (Thornberry, 2017). She used it twice in the expression *Leave Campaign*, in which she underscored that the campaign was successful thanks to her party.

To conclude, one of the keywords in the Brexit discourse was *leave*. It represented the antinomy "leaving the EU is a loss – leaving the EU is a gain", thus creating a specific,

pragmatic meaning depending on the context in which it was used. This antinomy was very clearly revealed in Theresa May's speeches, who initially opted for the first element of the antinomy, whereas after Brexit, she took the second, extreme position. Each of the politicians mentioned above exploited the word *leave* when formulating their stance.

3.2 Remain – the second sign of antinomy

A natural antonym of *leave* in the discourse on Brexit was the lexeme *remain*. With the help of the program AntConc, it was found one hundred seventy-six times in the analyzed speeches, most frequently in the context of the UK remaining in the EU. In David Cameron's speech from May 9, 2016 (Cameron, 2016), *remain* appeared eight times. By using it, the politician underscored that he strongly supports the option of remaining in the EU. He said, for instance: *So today I want to set out the big, bold patriotic case for Britain to remain a member of the EU*. This utterance indicates Cameron's confident tone, which could convince the recipients of his words about his standpoint. In the further part of his speech, the politician signalized that representatives from other countries also want the UK to *remain* in the EU. He said, e.g.: *Our allies have a very clear view. They want us to remain members of the European Union*. Thus, in this utterance, he again used the verb *remain* and the personal pronouns *they* and *us* and the possessive pronoun *our*. With the help of the pronouns *us* and *our* he identified himself with the British nation, and with the help of the pronoun *they* he referred to the allies of the United Kingdom. The word *they*, therefore, indicated those with whom the UK cooperated, and thus had a positive tone, similarly as the pronouns *us* and *our*.

Moreover, Cameron used the word *remaining* twice, which fulfilled a similar function to *remain*. It should also be noted that *stay* and *staying*, which were synonymous to *remain* in this context, also played this role. The former appeared in the speech four times and the latter once.

In Theresa May's speech, delivered on April 25, 2016 (May, 2016b) *remain* appeared thirteen times, e.g., in the following sentence: *But that does not mean we would be as safe as if we remain*. May uttered these words after she underlined that if the UK were not an EU member state, certain issues would remain unchanged, e.g., the UK would still work with the USA and other European countries. In the latter case, this cooperation was concerned with counteracting terrorism. Nevertheless, May also mentioned other ways of working against terrorism, to which the UK would not have access if it were not an EU member state. It is for this reason that May stated the country would not be as safe outside of the EU. Thus, she gave the word *remain* a positive tone here.

Furthermore, in the utterance *We should remain in the EU* she directly expressed her support for remaining in the commonwealth, which is underscored by her use of the modal verb *should*. However, although May used the word *remain* several times precisely to underscore that she supports the option of remaining in the EU, sometimes she also used it merely to present certain facts, as in the utterance: *The SNP have already said that in the event that Britain votes to leave but Scotland votes to remain in the EU, they will*

IV. Research by Young Scientists / Jaunųjų mokslininkų tyrimai / Badania młodych naukowców

P. Kubicha. Chosen Keywords in the Discourse of British Politicians on Brexit: A Pragmatic Analysis

press for another Scottish independence referendum. May used the word *remaining* (eight times) in a similar way. It is worth quoting the following utterance: *Remaining inside the European Union does make us more secure, it does make us more prosperous and it does make us more influential beyond our shores*. Here, with the help of the repetition of *does make us more* May strongly accented her stance on *remaining* and mentioned the benefits of this option. Moreover, similarly as in Cameron's speech, the words *stay* and *staying* also appeared in May's speech, both of them once.

The word *remain* was, however, used in a negative sense in the speech by the Brexit Party leader delivered on August 27, 2019 (Farage, 2019d). It appeared twice, for instance, in the utterance: *...the remain side may have lots of political parties but for the leave side a Johnson government committed to doing the right thing and the Brexit Party working in tandem would be unstoppable, would deliver a big parliamentary majority and would get this country free*. Here Farage referred to the accusations he directed at Boris Johnson and his governing party, stating that their actions are not helping to work out good terms for the UK in the context of leaving the EU. In the cited utterance, the politician used the words *remain* and *leave*. In this way, he created an opposition between the side supporting the option to remain in the commonwealth and the side supporting the option to leave it and underlined that the latter is right. He indicated that although many parties support the option to remain, the proper activity of the governing party in connection with the cooperation with the Brexit Party would lead to success, i.e., to the "freeing" of the country from the EU. In this way, he wished to underscore the potential of his party in striving towards working out beneficial terms of Brexit.

In Jeremy Corbyn's speech from April 14, 2016 (Corbyn, 2016a), the word *remain*, used six times, mainly in the context of remaining in the EU, had a positive tone, as in the utterance: *So Europe needs to change. But that change can only come from working with our allies in the EU. It's perfectly possible to be critical and still be convinced we need to remain a member*. Corbyn, thus, admitted that the EU has different weaknesses and that he is critical of certain actions taken in it, but concurrently indicated that he believes that cooperation will help make good decisions.

However, it is also worth considering Gisela Stuart's speech delivered on April 13, 2016 (Stuart, 2016). She used *remain* four times in her speech, twice in the context of remaining in the EU. Despite her membership in Jeremy Corbyn's party, Stuart did not support the opinion declared by the party's leader, i.e., that the UK should stay in the EU. In her speech, she said: *Those on the Remain campaign warn of disaster if we leave*. She wanted to underscore that she disagrees with this, and throughout her speech, emphasized that she supports the option to leave.

Concluding, *remain*, just like *leave*, was used in the context of Brexit in a positive as well as in a negative sense, which, again, was a sign of building a specific, pragmatic meaning depending on the context. This verb, thus, represented another antinomy, namely "remaining in the EU is a gain – remaining in the EU is a loss".

Conclusion

To conclude, two crucial keywords used in the Brexit speeches of politicians from the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Brexit Party were *leave* and *remain*. Brexit caused that the issue of the UK remaining in the EU or leaving it was mentioned in discourse. It should be noted that the opinion on Brexit of a given representative from one of the three parties and, therefore, also their use of the mentioned keywords in a specific way did not necessarily depend on their membership in a given political group. Total unanimity, i.e., support for the exit of the UK from the EU, could be observed only in the case of the politicians from the Brexit Party, as this party had been created to ensure that Brexit is brought about in accordance with the will of the majority of the voters who had decided this way.

Generally speaking, the use of the mentioned keywords by the politicians in the analyzed discourse created a given pragmatic context, which depended on the politicians' views on Brexit. However, given members of the three parties usually used the lexemes *leave* and *remain*, e.g., with a persuasive aim. They depicted their position in the context of leaving the EU or remaining in it, thus encouraging the citizens to vote in a given way in the referendum on Brexit. Last but not least, it was underscored that it was necessary to honour the definitive result of the referendum as the citizen's decision.

Acknowledgments

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