



A linguistic analysis based on the *Financial Times*

Shorter Article

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Introduction

In the referendum of 23 June 2016, the UK’s decision to leave the EU in the course of a Brexit was very close, with 51.9% (Leave) versus 48.1% (Remain). A year after the final withdrawal from the European Union, disillusionment seems to have spread in Great Britain. The focus of previous linguistic studies is mostly on the language used during the Leave and Remain campaigns. Charteris–Black (2019) is the first book-length study to provide a systematic description of the plethora of metaphors of Brexit. His analysis is based on the evaluation of a variety of data published in connection with the Brexit referendum, ranging from newspaper articles to social media posts and cartoons:

[. . .] once we look under the surface we find that understanding the metaphors of the Brexit debate provides rich insight into the profoundly moral outlooks that influenced both those who sought to leave the European Union and those who wished to remain in it. Members of the public, opinion formers and politicians relied on metaphor as a way of framing political issues and creating persuasive stories and allegories. Understanding these better helps us to understand not only what divided the two sides but also what both sides held in common: a belief and desire that they could improve their country. (Charteris–Black, 2019: 2)

Musolff (2021: 630) rightly points out that metaphors play an important role in expressing emotions on a divisive political issue like Brexit. He also mentions the impact of emotionalization that this can have on a political debate. (2021: 639). Taking the example of the proverb *You cannot have your cake and eat it*, Musolff outlines the effect of figurative language on emotion:

Brexit proponents’ reversal of the cake proverb into the assertion, ‘We can have our cake and eat it’, and their figurative interpretation of Brexit as a war of liberation (against the EU) triggered highly emotional reactions: triumphant affirmation among followers, fear and resentment among opponents. [. . .] [T]he combination of figurative speech (proverb, metaphor) with hyperbole heightened the emotional and polemical impact of the pro-Brexit argument. (2021: 628)

Using the example of a comprehensive sample of recent editions of the newspaper *Financial Times*, the present study examines a variety of metaphors from a cognitive perspective which reflect the attitude of the British population towards Brexit as described in the British press. So far, there have only been a few studies on this aspect. The results of the present paper are based on a close review of 9,952 articles on Brexit published in the *Financial Times* (accessible via the *Nexis Uni* newspaper database) between January 2020 and March 2022. Particular attention is paid to analysing the nature and use of metaphors in different thematic source domains, such as sickness, war and combat, which point to the current mood in the UK, compared to those used to express political positions during and immediately after the 2016 Brexit referendum.

General observations

The metaphors with which Brexit is framed in the *Financial Times* are overwhelmingly negative, which concurs with Charteris–Black’s results, who classifies the *Financial Times* (henceforth referred to as *FT*) as one of the three most pro-Remain newspapers (2019: 14). The trend of negative framing in both pro-Remain and in pro-Leave newspapers increased already before and especially in 2018 (Charteris–Black, 2019: 310), and clearly continues after 2020. Occasionally, the investigated texts feature metaphors that frame Brexit positively; however, this mostly happens in opinion pieces

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written by pro-Leave authors or in the reception of pro-Leave discourse. An example is the metaphor of finally getting a piece of cake or attempting to have one's piece of cake which reflects Boris Johnson's Brexit strategy (Charteris-Black 2019: 3) and which still persists. Some of the metaphors under investigation also lend themselves to both negative and positive framing, as they can depict an obstacle and an advantage, for instance the imagery of wind which occurs both as headwinds and tailwinds. The social and financial impact of the coronavirus pandemic also affects the metaphorical description of Brexit. Until March 2020, Brexit is described as the single biggest issue in UK politics, but afterwards coronavirus becomes the more immediate threat. There are diverging ideas on the outcome of both problems: The prevailing opinion is that of a 'double whammy' (FT, 31/03/2020), implying that Covid and Brexit at the same time will multiply the problems of Great Britain. However, towards the end of 2020, the contrasting idea starts to arise that Brexit is going to be a 'walk in the park' (FT, 15/07/2020) in comparison to coronavirus. Some articles also mention that Brexit has indeed become a sideshow for most of the world under the impact of Covid. Nevertheless, the unsolved nature of Brexit in 2020 also leads to mentions of caution, for instance in the quote that 'there is no vaccination against Brexit' (FT, 14/05/2021). Lastly, a few articles also hope that the communal spirit required to overcome 'the coronavirus is healing the divides of Brexit' (FT, 19/09/2020).

Main metaphors

There are several metaphors or clusters of related metaphors that stick out due to their high frequency and their appearance in a multitude of articles that are not connected to one another. Consequently, these metaphors seem to be fully entrenched in the discourse community about Brexit. A prime example for this is the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE metaphor, which has been popular ever since the first discussions of Brexit (Charteris-Black, 2019: 9). Musolff (2006: 34) rightly points out that 'the married partners scenario is applicable to any bilateral [. . .] relationship' (2006: 34). Following Musolff (2006), Đurović & Silaški (2018) focus on the analysis of the metaphor of a married couple, which is transferred to the political context, in order to reflect the problematic relationship between the UK and the EU. They emphasize that the metaphor of the married couple is commonly used by English-speaking journalists to illustrate the complex ties between the UK and the EU shortly before and immediately after Brexit. According to Đurović & Silaški, common examples of metaphors reflecting this scenario are *rocky marriage* and *shotgun divorce* (2018: 25-39). Milizia & Spinzi (2020) address the essential question of how the metaphor of divorce served as a linguistic strategy for British politicians and the media to justify political decisions and influence the general public. Relying on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Charteris-Black 2004), they also show how this metaphor scenario is at the same time used to express a critical point of view towards political actions

aimed at bringing about Brexit. Milizia and Spinzi come to the conclusion that

The DIVORCE metaphor has turned out to be malleable and mouldable, according to the different perspectives and contexts: going through a separation can be a disaster and a tragedy, a humiliation, yet ending a marriage and taking a different path can be emotionally therapeutic, even more so when the couple has been building towards separation for decades, and one of the two has always been a reluctant partner in an asymmetric marriage relationship. (2020: 160)

In 2.8% of the investigated newspaper articles, the collocation 'divorce deal' (FT, 23/04/2021) is used commonly as a synonym for the Brexit negotiations. Conversely, the partnership between the UK and the EU is described as a marriage; however, the word marriage often loses its originally positive connotation since it is usually accompanied by a negative adjective, such as in 'failed marriage' (FT, 27/02/2021). The term divorce is also quite frequently preceded by a valuing adjective, such as 'rocky Brexit divorce' (FT, 14/02/2020) or 'traumatic Brexit divorce' (FT, 23/12/2020). Overall, these metaphors frame Brexit mostly negatively. In the later articles, especially after the official exit of Great Britain in 2021, the relationship between the UK and the EU is increasingly described as a partnership or a friendship rather than a marriage, foregrounding the image of a 'divorce on reasonably amicable terms' (FT, 24/12/2020). Of the articles under scrutiny, 23% emphasize that 'post-Brexit Britain is badly in need of friends' (FT, 29/05/2021) and needs to build new partnerships. This trend is also observed in spoken discourse about Brexit (Milizia & Spinzi, 2020: 160). However, the new developments in EU-UK relations are sometimes accompanied by the fear that the EU might turn into a rival instead than a friend, or that the UK might become a prisoner of the EU rather than a partner. Another metaphor that expands upon the idea of the EU and the UK as a married couple going through a divorce is the headline 'Britain leaves EU "orphans" to fend for themselves' (FT, 07/02/2020), which describes smaller EU countries as the children of the UK and the EU which suffer under the divorce process. This shows the influence that the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE metaphor has on the general discourse of Brexit, since it inspires the creation of new metaphors that make sense in the related framework.

In the discourse of Brexit between 2016 and 2018, Charteris-Black still considers the parent-child relationship to be a separate frame (Charteris-Black, 2019: 198), but in the time period that this article assesses, it seems to be blended into the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE metaphor. Sometimes, especially in the earlier articles of the analyzed period, the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK is described as a marriage as well, regarding Scotland as partner in a failed marriage, or 'trapped in a forced marriage' (FT, 02/01/2020). While the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK is only occasionally described as a marriage in comparison to the EU-UK marriage (i.e. in about 0.8% of the articles examined), both

have in common that they frame the situation of Brexit negatively. Another main metaphor which usually describes the state of the Brexit negotiations rather than the process of Brexit as a whole is the CLIFF EDGE metaphor, which sometimes occurs in the variants ‘ragged edge’ (FT, 04/01/2022) or ‘precipice’ (FT, 11/12/2020). This metaphor describes the risk of the Brexit negotiations constantly being at the edge of failure, with the fear of them resulting in a hard Brexit. In later articles, when this fear relaxes a bit, the more hopeful collocation of having ‘skirted the ‘cliff-edge’” (FT, 05/02/2021) appears. Similarly to the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE metaphor, the CLIFF EDGE metaphor is so entrenched in the readers’ and writers’ mind that it is used almost naturally, such as in the collocation ‘cliff edge Brexit’ (FT, 07/09/2020). The CLIFF EDGE metaphor seems to be even more invariable than the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE metaphor, since the investigated articles do not display any different variants except for the aforementioned ‘ragged edge’ (FT, 04/01/2022) or ‘precipice’ (FT, 11/12/2020). This might be due to the fact that the CLIFF EDGE metaphor was established very early on by pro-Remainers to express the uncertainties that come with Brexit (Charteris-Black, 2019: 324). Thus, it had time to establish itself as a fixed phrase in association with Brexit.

This rigidity of the CLIFF EDGE metaphor stands in heavy contrast to the third group of main metaphors, which depict Brexit as a SHIP IN A STORM. The latter group comprises a lot of different metaphors which all relate to the semantic domains of storm, bad weather, and seafaring. These types of metaphors account for 18.1% of the data examined. Around 8.2% of them stress the crucial role that the debate on fishing rights and laws plays in the Brexit negotiations. While the overall framing of Brexit as a chaotic storm is negative, a number of metaphors in this field (i.e. about 3.4%) can also be successfully employed to frame Brexit positively. An example for this is the representation of the UK as a pirate ship. Especially the earlier articles in the investigated time period frame the UK’s ‘buccaneering’ (FT, 19/11/2019) strategy as something positive, focusing on the freedom and wealth that could come with piracy. Increasingly, this metaphor underwent a semantic and pragmatic pejoration, such as in ‘Brexit is now largely a sunk cost’ (FT, 15/09/2021). Musolff (2017: 649) observes a similar trend for the HEART OF EUROPE metaphor, in which the connotation of the metaphor changes from positive to negative. Musolff (2017) examines the development of the use of Britain at the heart of Europe as an essential metaphorical slogan occurring in British debates about the EU over a period of 25 years. He points out that the linguistic evidence documenting the use of this slogan increasingly takes on a mocking or pejorative undertone over time, including the portrayal of the heart of Europe as seriously ill. According to Musolff (2017), these metaphorical scenarios contributed to British citizens voting against remaining in the EU. This adds to the argument that there is a heavy increase in negative reception and framing of Brexit (see also Charteris-Black, 2019: 310). The examples of Brexit as a pirate ship are one of the few instances that maintain the LIBERATION metaphor which Charteris-Black describes

as dominant among pro-Leavers, although he already notes a decline in its usage (2019: 316).

Further examples that stylize the UK as a ship are the depiction of Boris Johnson’s government ‘tightly lashed to the Brexit mast’ (FT, 15/07/2021), the ‘Brexit ship hitting the rocks’ (FT, 12/12/2020), or the simple expression to ‘navigate Brexit’ (FT, 05/08/2019). The most dominant metaphor in this third cluster is the metaphor of wind, describing either beneficial or counterproductive results of the Brexit negotiations, which is expressed in the respective description of headwinds or tailwinds. However, especially in financial news, Brexit is for the most part described negatively as a storm, for example in ‘storming year for investors’ (FT, 04/01/2020), “‘perfect storm’ of Brexit-related costs’ (FT, 01/05/2021), or ‘Brexit bluster’ (FT, 08/12/2020) for investors. A connected metaphor is that of clouds, which has been employed for positive and negative framing, in expressions like ‘Brexit was a dark cloud over both the UK and EU’ (FT, 16/12/2021), ‘break in clouds after Brexit’ (FT, 27/02/2021), or “‘double cloud’ of Brexit and coronavirus’ (FT, 17/05/2021). In the discussion of fishing trade talks, several more unique metaphors connected to fish or water can be found, such as the headlines ‘[p]ostBrexit fish talks: set to go swimmingly’ (FT, 15/02/2020), ‘salmon farmers fear being caught in Brexit net’ (FT, 10/02/2020), or ‘EU proposal on fishing to get us all off the hook’ (FT, 02/12/2020). While most of the water-related metaphors foreground the destructive power of water, such as ‘Brexit maelstrom’ (FT, 03/04/2021) or ‘the Brexit negotiators left the City of London to sink or swim’ (FT, 18/01/2022), it is occasionally used for positive framing, for instance in quoting then-Environmental Secretary Michael Gove’s promise of a ‘sea of opportunity’ (FT, 15/01/2021) for fishing rights. The multitude of metaphors in the overall field of nautical language or weather phenomena stands in contrast to the relatively fixed metaphors of MARRIAGE/DIVORCE and CLIFF EDGE. However, the SHIP IN A STORM metaphors all contribute to the allegory of the UK as a ship in a storm, thus recognizing Brexit as a challenge, regardless of whether they frame the UK as wealthy pirate ship or as a little boat at the mercy of the sea and storms. The impact and the effectiveness of both the SHIP IN A STORM and the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE as successful allegories warning of Brexit are also documented in early pro-Remain discourse between 2016 and 2018 (Charteris-Black, 2019: 8).

Minor metaphors

Apart from the three aforementioned main metaphors, there is a number of smaller groups of metaphors that frame Brexit both positively and negatively. The most prominent of these minor groups are metaphors that frame Brexit as a WAR with various battles. These became especially popular after the completion of Brexit in 2021 and describe the continuing negotiations between the EU and the UK. Sometimes, the WAR metaphors are also applied to the battle with bureaucracy, the ‘battle with red tape’ (FT, 22/03/2021). While the word *war* is inherently negative, metaphors that include battle can also be used to frame

Brexit positively, if the battle is considered to be won. This latter opinion is especially reflected in more current articles. There are various distinct expressions that can be grouped among the WAR metaphors, even though some of them do not refer to war explicitly, but mention related concepts, such as siege, fighting and combat, and grief. Examples are ‘diplomatic rubble’ (FT, 09/06/2021), ‘Britain’s government is under siege’ (FT, 29/05/2020), and ‘Boris Johnson is being held hostage by the provisional wing of his own party’ (FT, 11/09/2020). Moreover, the Brexit transition period is described as a ‘minefield’ (FT, 24/07/2020) and there is the grief-related headline ‘Erasmus alumni mourn’ (FT, 04/01/2021). Even in terms of problem solution, vocabulary of weaponry is used, like in the expression ‘[t]here is no silver bullet to deal with Brexit woes’ (FT, 17/05/2021).

Related to the WAR metaphors, there are a few metaphors (i.e. 1.1%) that frame Brexit as a sickness or a wound. These are also inherently negative, except for ‘the coronavirus is healing the divides of Brexit’ (FT, 19/09/2020). Much more common are descriptions like ‘Brexit fever’ (FT, 29/01/2020), ‘Brexit injury’ (FT, 08/02/2021), or ‘malaise [. . .] over Brexit’ (FT, 09/01/2021). Also, the word *wound* is employed frequently, often in phrases like ‘reopening old wounds on Brexit’ (FT, 17/02/2020). Occasionally, Brexit is described as an act of self-harm, particularly in the increasing opinion of pro-Leavers that ‘we’ve shot ourselves in the foot’ (FT, 17/10/2020).

Generally, while the WAR metaphors emphasize the disagreements during negotiations, the WOUND/SICKNESS metaphors either describe the unhealthy infatuation with Brexit or the negative results of Brexit for the UK or parts of the UK, for instance in ‘Brexit is a slow bleed for the City of London’ (FT, 23/11/2021). A less frequent group of metaphors describes Brexit as a DRINK or a cup. Mostly, these feed into the image of a Brexit drink which the Tories ordered at a restaurant but send back later because they do not like it. This emphasizes the discontent with Brexit negotiations throughout the entire population. Related instances that frame Brexit as something that could be good but is somehow faulty are that the Brexit ‘chalice will go on poisoning’ (FT, 14/02/2020), or the headline ‘Brexit leaves nasty taste for fine wine trade’ (FT, 19/12/2020). Thus, the DRINK metaphors tend to emphasize missed opportunities and, as the last example illustrates, occur especially often in texts that deal with food or drink.

Related to food, there are also some FRUIT metaphors (0.2%), in which the fruits represent the benefits of Brexit, such as in the headline ‘giving a boost to the domestic fund market represents low-hanging fruit for the government post-Brexit’ (FT, 03/08/2020). However, it is often highlighted that these benefits are likely to not be reaped, for instance in ‘Johnson [. . .] risks being seen as failing to deliver the promised fruits of Brexit’ (FT, 02/12/2020) or ‘[t]rade talks to bear little fruit until autumn’ (FT, 22/07/2020). Hence, like the DRINK metaphors, most of the FRUIT metaphors also express discontent with the results of the Brexit negotiations.

Finally, a small group of metaphors (i.e. 0.1%) compares Brexit to moving houses. These can employ both positive

framing, such as ‘Brexit was like moving to a new house – initially a hassle but ultimately worth it’ (FT, 21/10/2020), and negative framing, for instance in ‘[i]f Brexit is like moving house, we’re downsizing’ (FT, 23/10/2020), or in ‘[d]oor shuts quietly’ on Brexit (FT, 01/02/2020). Perhaps the variability in framing in these metaphors is due to the relative rareness of the MOVING HOUSES metaphors. Unlike the CLIFF EDGE or the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE metaphor, the minor metaphors are not as established in public discourse and are thus used in different ways. There are also many other metaphors that occur in isolated findings only, for instance a variety of metaphors that describe Brexit as a certain type of entertainment or literature, both negatively and positively. Examples for that are the terms ‘saga’ (FT, 17/02/2020), ‘silly and cruel [. . .] fantasy’ (FT, 20/02/2021), ‘national psychodrama’ (FT, 31/12/2020), or ‘Brexit is a national tragedy’ (FT, 18/12/2020). These often reflect the contents of the respective article, as they are puns on the connected word fields. Other metaphors can take diverse forms, but their isolated occurrence indicates that they cannot exert a big impact on the perception of Brexit.

Conclusion

The present study has confirmed the pro-Remain attitude of the *Financial Times* as attested by Charteris–Black. It has also confirmed the increased negative framing of Brexit that has been indicated before 2020, reflected by different types of metaphors, such as the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE or CLIFF EDGE metaphor. Since this analysis is confined to several editions of the same newspaper, it can only provide limited results in terms of recent semantic and discourse shifts as documented by the British press. A desideratum for future study would be the investigation of additional newspapers in the relevant time frame as a comparison, especially pro-Leave newspapers. Additionally, it would be worth looking at the framing of Brexit in other mediums, such as on social media and in political communication, in line with Charteris–Black’s approach (2019: 13).

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