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Metaphors We Manipulate with

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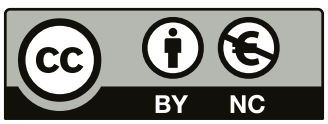

Brexit and the Myth of Grandeur

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The decision by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union came as a shock to many. A key player during the referendum campaign was the Vote Leave organisation which managed to convince people that they would be better off outside the European project. Their success was made all the easier as Euroscepticism had been running deep in the country for decades. It is on this fertile ground that Vote Leavers drew to persuade people of the necessity to leave. Using critical metaphor analysis, this paper examines the way Vote Leavers won the argument by developing three political myths, which, once combined, conjured up the notion of British grandeur. Drawing on Jonathan Charteris-Black's seminal works on the relation between metaphors and the creation of political myths in political rhetoric, this paper posits that the Brexit debate was not won solely on political ground and that the manipulative power of metaphors may have also been a key element. This might explain the current political deadlock, as political solutions might not provide the answers to the questions raised during the campaign.

Keywords: Brexit, rhetoric, metaphor, manipulation, myth, Vote Leave

La décision prise par le Royaume-Uni de quitter l'Union Européenne a été un choc pour beaucoup. Le groupe Vote Leave a été un acteur majeur durant la campagne en réussissant à convaincre les électeurs que la vie serait plus agréable en dehors du projet européen. Leur succès a été facilité par le fait qu'un fort courant eurosceptique traverse le pays depuis des décennies. C'est dans ce terreau fertile que Vote Leave a puisé pour convaincre le peuple. A l'aide de l'analyse critique des métaphores, cet article examine la façon dont Vote Leave a gagné en élaborant trois mythes politiques qui, de concert, célèbrent la notion de grandeur britannique. Grâce aux travaux de Jonathan Charteris-Black sur la relation entre les métaphores et la création de mythes politiques, cet article postule que la victoire en faveur du Brexit ne repose pas uniquement sur la politique et que le pouvoir de manipulation des métaphores a joué un rôle très important. Cela pourrait expliquer l'impasse politique actuelle dans la mesure où les solutions purement politiques ne semblent pas fournir de réponse aux problématiques soulevées durant la campagne référendaire.

Mots-clés : Brexit, rhétorique, métaphore, manipulation, Vote Leave

Introduction

On 23 June 2016, after more than 40 years of membership, Britain voted to leave the European Union (EU). This decision set in motion a difficult process that uncovered both the incapacity of the government to deliver on the popular result and a real divide within the British society. Now that the EU has agreed to postpone the Brexit deadline to give the United Kingdom (UK) more time to work out a satisfying agreement, it seems that the political polarization of the British society is at an all-time high [Hobolt *et al.* 2018: 4].

The pro-Brexit camp can be seen as a case in point for that matter. Few are those on the Brexit side who have changed their opinions and a second referendum might not produce the result that we, on the French side of the Channel [Peillon 2019], would expect [Hobolt 2017]. Notwithstanding that the Brexit lies have been exposed, in particular concerning the money that would be given to the National Health Service (NHS) in place of the EU [Abigail 2016], many are those who still want to see Brexit through [Curtice 2019]. The end seems to justify the means: some arguments were based on lies and yet, most pro-Brexit voters have not changed their minds [Goodwin 2019]. This shows how convincing the Leave campaign was, and in particular the Vote Leave organization, as it used entrenched British Euroscepticism.

The Vote Leave campaign was designated by the Electoral Commission as the official campaign in favour of leaving the European Union. Among its most prominent and outspoken members were Labour MP Gisela Stuart and Conservative MPs Michael Gove and Boris Johnson. With the addition of political strategists Matthew Elliott and Dominic Cummings, this five-strong group played a key role in the campaign as they coordinated between campaign committee meetings and met on a daily basis [Vote Leave 2016]. In part thanks to their cunning rhetoric, which drew on decades of staunch British Euroscepticism, they won the referendum and took the political debate to another level.

Indeed, Brexit has highlighted a generational, cultural and educational divide within British society [Goodwin 2016]. Factual arguments failed to really have an impact on the result. The Brexit lure seems to overcome the traditional socio-economic division between Conservative / Labour [Norris 2018]. It runs deeper, it is more subconscious, it resonates with the British soul. It appeals to deep-rooted prejudices towards the European project. This is why rationality seems useless to explain the outcome. We need to go beyond logic, into the collective sub-conscious and into the myth-making

process used by Vote Leave. To do this, I will use metaphors as there is no better link between ideology and myth, words and images and between the conscious and the unconscious [Charteris-Black 2011: 38].

1. Methodology

1.1. Elaboration of the corpus

To investigate the myth created by Vote Leave, I studied a corpus of 31 texts (Table 1), approximately 50,000 words (statements, speeches, open letters and newspaper articles) from their official website. They span several months, from 17 February to 16 June 2016. As those documents are still on their website three years after the result, it is fair to assume that they are considered as canonical texts and that they represent essential examples of Brexit rhetoric, and this is why I decided to study them.

I have decided to adopt a discourse system approach, as defined by Cameron and Low [Charteris-Black 2014: 185]. In other words, I will examine metaphors in a collection of political speeches from a particular genre, because all the documents in the corpus are related to a similar topic, Brexit.

To establish conceptual categories, I have identified metaphor patterns on the basis of source domains [Charteris-Black 2014: 185]. The different source domains will enable me to establish the different narratives, or myths, developed by the members of Vote Leave and their general ideology [Van Djik 2005: 17-18] or worldview. As far as metaphor identification is concerned, I will use Charteris-Black's distinction [2014: 176]:

> Metaphors in political rhetoric typically occur in phrases, or collocations, rather than as separable words, and for this reason the unit of measurement [will] be the phrase rather than the word.

This approach will enable me to focus on key metaphors in the various documents of the corpus [Charteris-Black 2004: 34-35].

Table 1: Vote Leavers' metaphors classified by type / source domain.

Code	Journey	Perso.	Destruction/ violence	Slavery/ freedom	Container	Others	Total
CO1	2	4	5	1		2	14
CO2		1	1	1		3	6
CO3	2		1				3
CO4	3	1				1	5
CO5		1	5			1	7
CO6	1		3				4
CO7	3	6	2	4	1	2	18
CO8					5	1	6
CO9		1		2			3
CO10	2	2		1	1		6
CO11	1		1		2	1	5
CO12	3	6				1	10
CO13	3	3	1	13		2	22
CO14			1		5	4	10
CO15	12	4	1	10	1	2	30
CO16	5	5	4		4	1	19
CO17	5	3	1	2		2	13
CO18			7	1		1	9
CO19		1			2		3
CO20		1	1		4		6
CO21	9		2	1		1	13
CO22		1	1			1	3
CO23		2			3		5
CO24					3	2	5
CO25	1	2		1	2	1	7
CO26	3	2	5		2	1	13
CO27	11	6	9	2	3	4	35
CO28	4	5	1			1	11
CO29		1	4				5
CO30	5	1					6
CO31	2	3				1	6
	77	62	56	39	38	36	308

1.2. Theoretical approach

The reasons behind the Brexit result are manifold and very often intertwined. Political, economic and sociological causes can be found to explain the outcome of the referendum. As far as the Brexit campaign is concerned, one additional element needs to be taken into consideration: the rhetoric used by Brexiters and in particular their extensive use of metaphors. As explained in the introduction, this paper will focus on the use of metaphors in the Vote Leave literature.

I will use Barcelona's definition of metaphor [2012: 32]:

> Metaphor has been defined, within cognitive linguistics, as a conceptual mapping in which the source and the target domain belong to two different superordinate experiential domains.

In other words, metaphor is "defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain" [Kövecses 2010: 4]. Following the conceptual approach devised by Lakoff and Johnson [1980: 3], I will study the recurrent conceptual metaphors used by the Vote Leave campaign. Kövecses [2010: 4] defines *conceptual metaphor* as:

> A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another. A conceptual domain is any coherent organization of experience.

In order to make sense of the different metaphors used by Vote Leavers, I will use critical metaphor analysis [Charteris-Black 2004] as methodological framework for this paper. This approach is particularly relevant in the case of political speeches:

> Critical metaphor analysis aims to identify which metaphors are chosen in persuasive genres such as political speeches, party political manifestos or press reports, and attempts to explain why these metaphors are chosen, with reference to the interaction between an orator's purposes and a specific set of speech circumstances [Charteris-Black 2014: 174].

I will study how Vote Leave managed to convince people that they would be in a better position outside the EU. According to Jonathan Charteris Black [2014: 174]:

> Critical analysis of metaphor in public communication demonstrates how this aspect of vocabulary choice influences an audience by providing a favourable representation of speakers and their policies, or an unfavourable representation of opponents and their policies.

When used systematically, metaphors "create political myths and discourses of legitimization and delegitimization that give rise to ideologies and world views" [Charteris-Black 2014: 174], here the fact that Britain needs to leave the EU. This is why a detailed analysis of metaphors will enable us to see that Vote Leave created a political myth that echoed with what a majority of British voters felt at heart [McGeever & Virdee 2018].

My objective is to show the manipulative power of metaphors as they propagated in discourse [Chilton 2005: 15]. Indeed, most Brexit arguments have been debunked[1], lies have been exposed, the importance of the EU has been showcased and explained and yet, many Brexiters are adamant: they still want to leave. The cognitive dimension of metaphors [Barcelona 2012: 2] seems to have played a key role in convincing British voters that leaving the European Union would be the best option.

I will examine three key myths: the Enoch Powell myth, the Robin Hood myth, and the idea of British exceptionalism. Once combined, these narratives reinforce the notion of British grandeur and stress the absolute necessity to both leave the EU and to take back control.

This idea of control represents the backbone of Brexit rhetoric. It is therefore not surprising to see that the four terms that are the most used in the corpus are *people* (202), *will* (434), *take back* (70), and *control* (224). The notion of control is present everywhere and permeates every myth created, as we will see now.

2. Overview of key findings

2.1. The Enoch Powell Myth

Euroscepticism has been running deep within British politics for decades [Alexandre-Collier 2014]. It was sometimes played down by Europhile prime ministers, such as Tony Blair, but most of the time it was a reality British decision makers had to take into consideration. It even damaged the careers of powerful figures such as John Major, David Cameron, or even Margaret Thatcher [Schnapper 2000]. It means that attacking the EU was much easier than to support it and would attract more attention. Brexiteers knew that and made the most of it. They also had a structural advantage: promising something new is always more efficient than being in favour of the status quo, in particular if this status quo is based on a very uneasy relationship [Bonnet 2019].

1 For example, it has been proved that the £350m figure sent to the EU every week is actually the gross figure of the UK contribution [Travis 2016]. The figure is £136m a week.

This is why the Brexiteers displayed much confidence. This debate was a long time coming, they had time to poke and prod British opinion, to assess the general mood towards Europe and use it to their own advantage. The EU being seen as a nebulous organization whose influence is felt everywhere but very hard to define, one key feature of their rhetoric is assertiveness [Buckledee 2018: 27]. They do not suppose, they do not guess, they make assertions and their objective is to unveil the truth. Revealing what he saw as the difficult truth was also what Enoch Powell crusaded for [Schofield 2013].

Both a scholar and a right-wing British politician, Enoch Powell came to prominence in the 60s as he warned of the danger of mass immigration coming from the Commonwealth, following the introduction by the Labour government of the 1968 Race Relations Act that made it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services to people because of their ethnic background [Legislation 2020].

Even if he lacked the common touch, Powell nonetheless was a brilliant orator. The two main aspects of his rhetoric were his use of reported dialogues and his metaphors [Charteris-Black 2011: 109]. In his metaphors, Britain was seen as a container [Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 92-93]: there is only a limited amount of space available. Should immigrants overwhelm the locals, this would lead to a river of blood [Telegraph 2007].

It seems that Vote Leave sought inspiration from Powell's speeches and the one feature of Powell's rhetoric that Vote Leavers cherished the most is the use of container metaphors. Britain works quite well but being an island, space is limited. Immigration would disrupt this nice (Victorian) order:

> (01) **The shortage of primary school places** is yet another example of **how uncontrolled migration is putting unsustainable pressures on our public services.** [CO8]

Here, public services are seen as containers that are being filled by uncontrolled immigration. The implication is that immigration will deteriorate, even destroy, public services. It also implies that local people will be denied access to those schools, hospitals, job centers, etc. Britain will suffocate because of EU policy to allow thousands of migrants to come to the UK. The situation will be all the worse as migrants, according to Vote Leave literature, will go directly to Britain. Just like the mother country of the Commonwealth in the 60s, Britain is a magnet that is irresistible:

> (02) Membership of the EU means we are completely unable to control EU migration, and **that puts unsustainable pressure on school places**. This will only get worse with five more countries – Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey – **in the pipeline to join the EU**. [CO8]

Here, people from countries that are not even members of the EU will be sent directly and without control to Britain (it is difficult to stop and check what is in a pipeline). The term *pipeline* is used 6 times in total and shows that Britain is willing to welcome immigrants. Pipelines are used to provide oil or gas to sustain the economy of a country. The same goes with immigrants who will fuel the British economy and at the same time flood and saturate the job market.

Consequently, in the eyes of Vote Leavers, it seems that Britain has not learned the lessons from the past. Just like Britain "busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre" in the 60s in the words of Powell [Telegraph 2007], the country is once again described as shooting itself in the foot as it even provides money for those countries to join the EU:

> (03) These problems will only get worse when countries **in the pipeline to join the EU become members in the near future**. British taxpayers are already paying nearly £2 billion for Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey to join the EU. [CO23]

The question of money is a central feature, as we will see later. Container metaphors are particularly powerful as they allow Vote Leavers to go beyond fruitless criticisms of immigration. Depicting Britain as an enclosed place highlights its outward looking ambition. For centuries, Britain looked beyond its shores and one of the reasons why it turned into such a vast and influential empire was because of this lack of space [Lynn 2001]. If we read between the lines, it is not immigration *per se* that is problematic, it is the fact that it endangers the very foundations of a country that has always tried to spread its influence abroad [Bonnet 2019].

Actually, most Vote Leavers use their personal background to celebrate immigration:

> (04) I am an immigrant who came to Britain from Germany in 1974 and I ended up an MP and a government minister. [CO7]

> (05) I am the proud descendant of immigrants. [CO19]

> (06) I'm only here today because Britain welcomed my father as a refugee from Czechoslovakia in 1938. [CO28]

This allows them to show that Britain is a welcoming country and that they are not anti-migration. It proves that their approach is not that of "Little Englanders" [Chotiner 2019] as they do not resent immigration, what they dislike is the way the EU handles immigration.

We can see here the persuasive power of metaphors. Drawing on collective memory and unconscious representations of the glorious imperial history of the country, metaphors are used to turn what could be seen as narrow-mindedness, that is the rejection of other people coming in, into a celebration of the British liberal past. By celebrating the appeal of the country, as Britain was an economic magnet, metaphors enable Vote Leavers to attack the EU's restrictive policies as they force its members to welcome migrant on supposedly no solid or logical ground.

The Powell myth shows that the UK is in danger and needs to take back control so as not to be invaded and destroyed by mass immigration. More than that, the country has to fight to disentangle itself from European oppression.

2.2. Robin Hood myth

Dominic Cumming's masterstroke was to come up with the promise that leaving the EU would divert £350M to the NHS [Bennet 2018]. This was a lie, yet it was present in most speeches. It was part of what can be seen as the Robin Hood myth. Basically, the tale of Robin Hood is the confrontation between a group of selfless English people and an unaccountable and illegitimate ruling elite of Norman/ French origin (King John's parents were both French: Henry II Plantagenet and Alienor d'Aquitaine). According to the well-known legend, the group of English Merry Men stole from the rich and gave to the poor [Seal 2001; Coote & Kaufman 2018]. A similar pattern emerges in the Brexit debate.

The EU is seen as a self-destructive bully that will harm Britain. This is why metaphors of destruction and violence are widely used. Here is one example among many others:

> (07) And just imagine **the utter carnage** that would have affected our economy had we listened to the EU elite and joined the Euro. [CO13]

The EU is a force for evil that steals the money of law-abiding British citizens. Here metaphors of violence show British people being hurt by the EU:

(08) The unelected and unaccountable Court has ordered us to pay millions in tax refunds to these multinationals – **money that comes straight from working people's pockets**. [CO22]

(09) However hard we try to abide by the rules, it is inevitable that the British tax payer **will be routinely stung by fines**. This makes people risk averse and afraid to consider doing things differently or to try something new. [CO3]

Personifications also come in handy to reinforce the Robin Hood myth. The EU is a rich despot and the British government becomes its righthand person, just like the Sherriff of Nottingham:

(10) It would in any normal world be a strange choice to make for a British government that whilst bearing down on welfare spending and other budgets since the election we continue to send to **this wealthy EU** hundreds of millions of taxpayers' money. [CO16]

More than just stealing money, the EU is an oppressive force that prevents people from thinking outside the box. You have to comply, whether you like it or not. In a way, the country is seen as being taken hostage by the EU, as Michael Gove put it on 19 April:

(11) We're voting **to be hostages locked in the back of the car and driven headlong towards deeper EU integration**. [CO10]

As the EU keeps Britain down and steals her money, she is left with no choice but to break free. The term *free* is used 150 times in total. Freedom / slavery metaphors are very often used in the corpus. Most refer to the EU's tyrannical control over Britain:

(12) [The EU is] a regulatory **straight jacket**. [CO27]

(13) The EU system is **a ratchet hauling us** ever further into a federal structure. [CO15]

Some also show that Britain needs to be free to really prosper:

(14) Just think of the freedom you would have to innovate if **we were no longer forced to compel with every diktat from Brussels**. [CO13]

There is an inherent tension between slavery and freedom. This rhetorical deadlock needs to be broken by a popular and democratic uprising, that is by the In / Out Referendum. Should Britain remain subjugated to the EU or should she be free? This is a simple, even simplistic vision. It highlights the manipulative power of metaphors in that this Manichean approach (slavery vs. freedom) sidelines the positive dimension of the EU. For example,

farmers and universities are granted EU funds, EU regulation guarantees transparency and quality and close economic cooperation has prevented war on the continent. But all this is left in the dark because of metaphors. As Kövecses points out, while metaphors highlight some aspects of a concept, they also necessarily hide other aspects [Kövecses 2010: 91-92]. The negative aspects of the EU highlighted by metaphors hide the positive ones.

If one bears in mind this highlighting / hiding dimension of metaphors [Jamet & Terry 2019], is it really surprising that some of the most vocal Brexiteers are fishermen? Yes, the EU imposes fishing quotas – but at the same time the Single market enables them to sell more than 70% of their production [Thisismoney 2016]. Metaphors make them see the oppressive side of EU, not the positive – and vital – dimension attached to it.

The Robin Hood myth is particularly pregnant as it echoes entrenched cultural emotions: the opposition between the people and the elite, freedom and slavery, continental Europe and insular Britain [Schnapper 2000].

According to this myth, Brexit would lead to an extra £350M allocated to the NHS. Talking about the NHS was indeed the cherry on the cake as it encapsulates all those emotions: created in 1948, right after the war, it has been ever since a symbol of Britishness [Bradley 2007], a collective reward after what was seen as a people's war against a tyrannical – and European – Nazi regime. Besides, saving the NHS means saving lives. Not only will Brexit save Britishness, it will also save British lives [Bonnet 2019]. It is therefore a patriotic duty in a country attached to its role as a beacon to the world [Charteris-Black 2014: 155].

2.3. The myth of British exceptionalism

Voting leave on 23 June 2016 was both a symbolical and actual parting of the ways. Britain would go it alone, away from the European bloc. At the metaphoric level, this was materialized by the abundant use of journey metaphors. This source domain is the most used by Vote Leavers as journey metaphors account for 25% of all metaphors (table 1).

Journey metaphors are particularly useful as they are quite easy to understand. Going forward is positive while moving backward or standing still is negative [Charteris-Black 2011: 88]. It is along those lines that Vote Leavers used those metaphors: the EU is on the wrong path while Britain is moving in the right direction.

The EU has taken the wrong path and is heading toward disaster. The reason for this is that the EU is a "**deeply misguided** and troubled institution" according to Nigel Lawson [CO1]. It simply cannot change as it is wearing blinkers:

> (15) The EU is an institution **that keeps to a single trajectory**, incapable of critical self-examination. [CO7]

An outdated ideology is stifling incentives and jeopardizing the future of the whole organization:

> (16) Businesses, growth and jobs have all been sacrificed to satisfy **the dogmatic march** towards greater integration and a federal European superstate. [CO13]

Despite her best efforts, Britain is incapable of turning the situation around and therefore has to leave:

> (17) We have proved to ourselves time and again that we cannot **change the direction. We cannot change the pace***.* We cannot interrupt the steady erosion of democracy, and given that **we do not accept the destination** it is time to tell our friends and partners, in a spirit of the utmost cordiality, that we wish to forge a new relationship based on free trade and intergovernmental cooperation. [CO15]

It is now a necessity for Britain to leave. But not out of selfishness. On the contrary, leaving the EU is a selfless act that will benefit the EU as Britain will set an example for others to follow:

> (18) I believe that open, honest and fair trade is **the best vehicle** for lifting people out of poverty. [CO12]

> (19) Let me end by saying I also think it could **advance social justice across the whole continent**. A vote to Leave by the British people might be the shock to the EU system that is so desperately needed. [CO16]

This is indeed a brilliant rhetorical spin. What might look like egotism is turned into altruistic bravery. We can see here another manipulative feature of metaphors: as they are image-based, journey metaphors create a narrative whereby Britain becomes a hero that will guide other nations out of European misery [Bonnet 2018]. By walking out of the EU door, Britain will regain her position as a world leader.

In the eyes of Vote Leavers, the Remain camp notoriously claimed that leaving the EU would be dangerous. This was dismissed as mere scare-mongering by Brexiteers who accused Remainers of creating the so-called

"Project Fear" to scare people off [Schnapper 2017]. In the following example, metaphors allow Gisela Stuart to ridicule the Remain camp while offering a hopeful vision of the future.

> (20) To those who say leaving is a leap in the dark I say **it is jumping from darkness into light**. [CO7]

The notions of positive light and vision along the way are essential. Brexiteers seem to have seen the light, contrary to Remainers who are depicted as being in the dark, meaning that they will oppress people:

> (21) And the people who are hardest-hit will be those who can least afford it. Cameron offered not **a glimmer of light for them**. [CO27]

Vote Leavers want to offer a brighter future. In this example, landscape metaphors are combined with journey metaphors:

> (22) We can see **the sunlit meadows beyond**. I believe we would be mad not to take this once in a lifetime chance **to walk through that door** because the truth is it is not we who have changed. [CO15]

Personifications are also significant for that matter:

> (23) I truly believe **the UK's best days lie ahead of us as an independent, free trading, globally competitive nation**. The facts are absolutely on our side. We speak the world's international business language; our contract law is world class and our judicial system is one of the least corrupt in the world. [CO17]

According to the Brexit rhetoric, outside the EU Britain will once again proudly rise above other nations and regain its rightful place at the top. It will finally be in control of its destiny.

Conclusion

Vote Leave managed to strike an emotional chord as it appealed to a nostalgic part of British society [Franklin 2019]. The Powell myth reminded people how precious their land was and the Robin Hood myth showed that it was threatened by the EU. It became vital to leave so as to preserve British exceptionalism. Those three myths put together conjured up the grandeur of Great Britain and highlighted the incongruity for this glorious country to be limited by a European organization.

Beyond the lies and beyond the manipulation, the Brexit rhetoric, shaped by metaphors, achieved an incredible feat. Yet, even if the myth of grandeur worked well to undermine the EU, it offers no real solutions for the country

after the referendum. We can see the pernicious dimension of metaphors. As they both hide, even obliterate, one side of the debate [Kövecses 2010: 91], here the positive contribution of the EU, and their appeal to the sub-conscious [Charteris-Black 2011, 2014], they can lead to emotional rather than rational decisions. This, I think, goes a long way in explaining the current difficult situation.

All corpus references are available at http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/

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