

7 Discursive construction of affective polarization in Brexit Britain

Opinion-based identities and out-group differentiation

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Introduction

This chapter builds on emerging research that suggests that attitudes towards Brexit cut across traditional party lines are very strong and underpinned by emotion and identity. In fact, Leave versus Remain affiliations now seem a more prominent source of identity than traditional party identification: “There is now strong evidence that Brexit-based identity polarisation is a key trend in the UK – and, by a number of measures, is as strong or stronger than political party consolidation” (Duffy et al., 2019, p. 16; similarly also Murray, Plagnola, & Corra, 2017). For instance, a 2018 survey demonstrated that while only 9% of the British population had a very strong partisan identity, 44% identified as having a very strong Brexit identity, with this identification being strong on both sides of the Leave-Remain argument (Curtice, 2018). As such, Brexit has been creating a new source of political identification (apparently, intrinsically highly rewarding) which is capable of reshaping political divisions and reinvigorating political participation.

These Brexit identities are characterized by affective polarization which is, at a basic level, defined as “an emotional attachment to in-group partisans and hostility towards out-group partisans” (Hobolt, Leeper, & Tilley, 2018, p. 4; also Duffy et al., 2019, p. 16). This is more than just mere ideological polarization over political matters: “Antipathy towards partisan opponents has escalated substantially among citizens. This has meant that increased in-party favoritism has been matched by greater negative stereotyping and out-group discrimination” (Hobolt, Leeper, & Tilley, 2018, p. 4). As Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley (2018) argue, the emerging affective polarization around Brexit identities compromises “people’s willingness to talk across the political divide” (p. 73).

Essentially, this affective polarization manifests itself in two different ways: (1) differentiation, whereby “one side views the other side’s traits as negative and its own traits as positive, or one side reduces interaction with the other side” (Duffy et al., 2019, p. 8), and (2) perception bias, when “people experience the same realities in completely different ways, depending on

the Brexit identities with which they associate” (Duffy et al., 2019, p. 8). It is the former aspect – differentiation – that is the primary focus of this chapter.

Substantially, this differentiation discursively reveals itself in different modes of de-legitimation of the out-group(s). With this chapter aligning itself with the definition of hate speech as “forms of expression that are motivated by, demonstrate or encourage hostility towards a group – or a person because of their membership of that group” (OSCE, 2009, p. 17), these various dissimilation strategies essentially qualify as examples of hate speech.

Against this background, this chapter deals with the pertinent question of how Leavers and Remainers, as opinion-based groups, communicate, share and exchange their perceptions, cognitions and emotions in regard to out-groups. More specifically, its aim is to investigate which topics, discursive strategies and linguistic devices have been employed by British politicians to construct Leave and Remain identities in a sense of out-group antagonism(s) in contra-distinction to the given in-group.

Drawing on the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse studies, this chapter is located within the qualitative research tradition, belonging to the domain of constructivist and critical research and following the interpretive paradigm. By looking at how Leavers and Remainers discursively construct the “other”, the inquiry provides an empirical example of (a part of) collective identity formation and meaning-making in the process of Brexit, and adds to the literature on growing affective polarization along Brexit lines in the UK. So far, surprisingly little work has been done in explaining how these Brexit identities are constructed in public discourse, so it is my hope that this study will encourage further research and discussion of this fascinating phenomenon.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first two sections put forward a theoretical and methodological framework for the analysis. The third section then provides a general overview of out-group discourse in the Brexit debate and sets the scene for the subsequent two-level empirical analysis: (1) thematic and (2) an in-depth. The conclusion concisely summarizes the key argument and contextualizes the empirical findings.

Theoretical considerations

The conceptual and theoretical framework of the chapter is that of Critical Discourse Analysis, and, in particular, of the DHA (Wodak, 2004; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Titscher et al., 1998). Critical Discourse Analysis perceives both written and spoken discourses as “a form of social practice” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). The governing assumption underscoring this chapter is thus a dialectical relationship between certain discursive situations on the one hand and the institutions and social structures in which they are embedded on the other. Put differently, situational, institutional and social contexts affect and constitute discourses, while discourses simultaneously affect and constitute social and political reality (De Cilla, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999, p. 157). In other words, following Fairclough’s (1992)

assertion that “discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning” (p. 64), this chapter does not deal only with representations and discourses about Brexit identity, but Brexit identity is understood here as an “internalized structuring impetus which more or less strongly influences social practices” (De Cilla, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999, p. 156). As such, I base my research on the assumption that Brexit identities conceived as specific forms of social identities, are – just like national identities – “discursively, by means of language and other semiotic systems, produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed” (De Cilla, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999, p. 152).

In line with Wendy Brown’s (1998) argument that collective identity is often developed as a result of external forces and the collective’s response to them, Brexit identities were stirred and created by a huge political shift. In fact, the Brexit result itself is, after all, understood as an example of identity politics (Kuhn, 2019). Both Leavers and Remainers have been going through a process of producing shared meanings to construct collective identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). These meanings provide the basis on which groups can (and do) define boundaries and a sense of belonging, binding individuals together and providing means of orientation in post-referendum Britain (and the world).

Against this background, this chapter holds that the construction of Brexit identity, just like other opinion-based group identities, is *inter alia* facilitated by constructing and framing an out-group. Identities are “constructed through, not outside, difference”, Hall and Du Gay (1996) write, and it is only “through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not that the positive meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed” (pp. 4–5).

Methodological considerations

The corpus analyzed in this study consists of a collection of speeches by prominent Leave and Remain politicians. As a “coherent stream of spoken language that is prepared for delivery by a speaker to an audience for a purpose on a political occasion” (Charteris-Black, 2014, p. xiii), political speeches belong to a discursive genre strategically aimed at “influencing others, using rhetoric to persuade, excite, and claim leadership” (Klebanov et al., 2008, p. 448). Hence, they represent highly performative texts, drawing on genre conventions and making extensive use of metaphor (Fairclough, 2000).

Due to space constraints and the need to strike a balance between breadth and depth of analysis, this chapter focuses on analysis of ten speeches by prominent Leave and Remain politicians: Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson on the Leave side, and Tim Farron and Vince Cable on the Remain side. All the speeches deal with Brexit and have been selected on a number of criteria (including the title of the speech; its subject outlined in the introductory sentences; the occasion on which it was delivered; the nature of the intended audience) in order to provide a balanced sample. The following table sums up the key features of the corpus.

Table 7.1 Speech Corpus

<i>Subcorpus</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Political Affiliation</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Date of the Speech</i>	<i>Context</i>
Leave	Nigel Farage	UKIP	Leader of UKIP (2006–2016); MEP	28/6/16	First post-Brexit speech delivered to the European Parliament
	Boris Johnson	Conservative Party	Foreign secretary	3/10/17	Conservative conference speech
	Boris Johnson	Conservative Party	Foreign secretary	14/2/18	The first in a series of “road to Brexit” addresses to by government ministers
Remain	Nigel Farage	Brexit Party	Leader of Brexit Party (2019-present); MEP	11/11/19	Pre-election speech in which Nigel Farage revealed that the Brexit Party would not contest 317 Conservative-held seats
	Nigel Farage	Brexit Party	Leader of Brexit Party (2019-present); MEP	13/11/19	Speech to Brexit Party supporters in North East London
	Tim Farron	Liberal Democrats	Leader of Liberal Democrats (2015–2017)	11/5/16	Speech during the referendum campaign
	Tim Farron	Liberal Democrats	Leader of Liberal Democrats (2015–2017)	20/9/16	Liberal Democrats conference speech
	Tim Farron	Liberal Democrats	Leader of Liberal Democrats (2015–2017)	25/10 /16	Speech on post-Brexit racism
	Vince Cable	Liberal Democrats	Leader of Liberal Democrats (2017–2019)	18/9/18	Speech to Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton
	Vince Cable	Liberal Democrats	Leader of Liberal Democrats (2017–2019)	17/3/19	Speech to Liberal Democrats’ spring conference

Source: Author’s own.

In accordance with DHA, guided by Krzyzanowski's (2010, 2018) approach, the analytical part of this chapter will follow the two-level pattern: (1) a thematic analysis and (2) an in-depth analysis (for application of this approach see, for instance, Zappettini [2019]). The thematic analysis will focus on easily identifiable dominant narratives that characterize the portrayal of out-groups and dissect the core themes which form the structure of the out-group discourse (Krzyzanowski, 2010, pp. 81–83; Krzyzanowski, 2018, p. 83). In the words of Van Dijk (2001), constituent topics “conceptually, summarize the text, and specify its most important information. In theoretical terms such topics can be described as semantic macro-propositions, that is, as propositions that are derived from sequences of propositions in the text” (p. 83). They will be identified by means of indicative analysis, i.e. via “decoding the meaning of text passages – usually taking place via several thorough readings – and then ordering them into lists of key themes and sub-themes” (Krzyzanowski, 2010, p. 81), with the emphasis being on discourse topics (Van Dijk, 2001), not text topics. The second level of the analysis will investigate the structure of the discourse underlying the said contents and focus on the linguistic forms involved in the construction of out-groups (Krzyzanowski, 2010, pp. 83–89; Krzyzanowski, 2018, p. 83). In other words, it will pay particular attention to the immediate linguistic devices (mostly in the sense of lexical units and syntactical means) that enable the hostile communicative acts and sentiments that underlie various assertions of out-group differentiation. This will allow us to look also at the micro-practices that Leavers and Remainers engage in to construct the other and give collective identity categories certain meaning(s).

Out-groups and Brexit polarization

Both Remainers and Leavers display a clear tendency towards dichotomization – a tendency in which they categorize the world into rigid and simplistic dichotomies of us versus them. As noted in the above discussion, the animosity across Brexit opinion-based groups in fact cross-cuts long-standing partisan divisions (Hobolt, Leeper, & Tilley, 2018). Essentially, both Remainers and Leavers constructively and reproductively employ the strategy of presupposing inter-group differences and heavily engage in out-group denigration in the sense of hate-based offending of the other. In the words of Duffy et al. (2019): “In the period after the EU referendum, signs of this differentiation – where one group stereotypes the other and treats them with bias – surfaced in the UK, built around Leave and Remain identities” (p. 57) (similarly also Hobolt, Leeper, & Tilley, 2018).

As further mapped out below, such generation of negative characteristics about the out-groups serves a number of difference purposes. Not only does it legitimize the in-group's antagonism against the out-group per se,

but it also validates the in-group's own actions. At the same time, while producing opportunities for social validation of ideas and shared cognition, it also provides conceptual bases around which the Remain/Leave collectives can cohere. Last but not least, the dissimilation strategies also help create group-internal homogenization of the out-groups and, in so doing, strengthen distinct shared experiences and build internal consensus around the in-group's meaning and identity.

As the careful reading of the speeches reveals, most of the out-group differentiations in the Brexit debate are relational, rather than non-relational, meaning that very often, to achieve positive in-group evaluation, the speakers apply the repeated comparative to indicate the relationship of comparison. Indeed, the out-group is often presented, commonly in terms of dichotomized values, as a diametric opposite to the in-group.

Importantly, in the Brexit context, discursive constructions of out-groups as the other are closely accompanied by in-group favoritism. Put another way, out-group denigration necessarily goes hand in hand with in-group superlatives. Indeed, the dissimilation strategy can be also understood as a strategy of emphasizing in-group singularity. As De Cilla, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) argue, "the relationship of uniqueness is nothing but a relationship of difference to all other elements involved in the comparison" (p. 162). Both sides of the Brexit arguments thus switch with equal facility between the discursive strategies of dissimilation (aiming at the construction of inter-group differences) and discursive strategies of assimilation (aiming at the construction of intra-group sameness) (De Cilla, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999). Yet, however interesting, an analysis of this in-group favoritism unfortunately falls beyond the remit of this study.

Before turning to the detailed two-level analysis, let us dwell briefly on how the referent out-group(s) are generally named and referred to linguistically in the Brexit context. As we will see, the dissimilation will vary in its degree of abstraction/attribution specificity, with both groups changing the level of vagueness-specificity very quickly.

Both Remainers and Leavers constantly categorize the other into various groups. For Remainers, the out-group is ordinarily referred to as the *Conservatives* (or the *Tories*, rather than the Conservative Party), the *Labour Party* (the *Labour*), *UKIP* (or *UKippers*), occasionally more specifically as the *Conservative Brexit Government* (a *Conservative government*); the *Corbyn crowd*; or *Labour people*. Leavers most often position the *Conservative Party*, the *Labour Party* (*Labour*), *Liberal Democrats* (the *Lib Dems*, or pejoratively *fanatics in the Liberal Democrats*) as the others. Both groups also accentuate certain people ad hominem: in the case of Remainers, it is mostly Jeremy Corbyn and David Cameron; in the case of Leavers, it is Theresa May (*Mrs May*) and *Boris* (rather than Boris Johnson). Sometimes, the level of vagueness increases, with the Remainers calling the out-group governments, politicians, English nationalists (*anti-European nationalists*). Leavers seem to use a larger variety of expressions, including, for instance,

the *multinationals*, the *merchant banks*, the *big politics*, the *establishment* or *calculating forces of darkness*. On several occasions, however, they opt for vaguer expressions, such as, for instance, *some people*. Notably, the Leavers often refer to *Remainers* (both Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson) or *Remainiacs* (especially Nigel Farage) as the other, while this tendency is much less obvious the other way around. Unlike the Leavers, the Remainers also more often add the “Brexit” signifier (as in *Brexit economists*).

As we can see, the speakers do not presuppose out-group heterogeneity, but rather out-group sameness. In other words, the political figures under scrutiny here do not distinguish, for instance, between Labour Remainers and Labour Leavers – for them, the Labour as a whole is an out-group. This said, the mentality traits attributed to the out-group include heterogeneous stereotypical qualities such as *xenophobic*, *absurd*, *uncaring*, *reckless* in the Remain subcorpus and *fanatic*, *abject*, *in denial*, *angry* and *upset* in the Leave subcorpus. It follows that both camps discursively create a homogeneous out-group with a shared mentality and convey the message that the above-mentioned traits of absurdity, carelessness, anger and others characterize each single member of the imagined out-group equally. Yet, the previous research has suggested that a homogeneous out-group is perceived as more threatening than a heterogeneous one (Corneille et al., 2001).

Thematic analysis: core topics

Narratives common to both subcorpora

In both subcorpora, the analysis of narratives emphasizing the “othering” of the out-group reveals five semantic macro-areas related to the discursive construction of the out-group in the Brexit discourse: (1) narrative of a political failure; (2) narrative of a damage done; (3) narrative of incompetence; (4) narrative of a threat; (5) narrative of a betrayal. While reporting these narratives separately for reasons of analytical clarity, it is worth noting that, in reality, these macro-areas do not function completely independently rhetorically, and instead are often closely interrelated. In what follows, the chapter will explore each of them, while providing textual examples of each case.

Narrative of political failure

The narrative of a political failure caused exclusively by the out-group functions in a number of ways. As we can see in excerpts (1) and (2), *ex negativo*, it serves to portray the out-group as a group that has failed. At the same time, both groups pre-empt condemnation of their own Brexit-related failures by blaming others. Lastly, it also helps construct and negotiate a collective political experience. While the main topics include political failings (in a rather general sense, as opposed to the narrative of the damage done) in both cases, the Remain side accentuates the selfishness of the

out-group, while Leavers focus on the disrespect for the referendum result. These aspects may be illustrated by the following examples (1) and (2):

(1) David Cameron's handling of our relationship with Europe is a master class in selfish, shallow short-termism. Party before country at every turn (Tim Farron).

(2) [...] by the Labour Party, who have completely broken their manifesto pledge in 2017 to respect the result of the referendum (Nigel Farage).

Narrative of the damage done

Closely related to the narrative of failure is the narrative of the damage done. As examples (3) and (4) illustrate, the out-group is constructed as having taken a position that has caused much specific damage and harm – not only to the in-group but also to the country as a whole. This narrative functions primarily to denote past inappropriate out-group action (mostly political but also economic). At the same time, by emphasizing emotional ties to the country and national pride, it also serves to activate national identity. Here, the Brexit-based identity thus becomes closely linked to the national identity. The following main topics that relate to the construction of the narrative of the damage done have been identified: on the side of Remainers it is especially fragmentation, discontinuity, new divisions, new fault lines and decline; on the side of the Leavers it is mostly crisis and protraction.

(3) David Cameron risked our future, and he lost. And while he waltzes off to riches and retirement, our country is plunged into economic uncertainty, insecurity and irrelevance on the world stage [...] The Tories took the gamble, but Britain will pay the price. What an absolute disgrace (Tim Farron).

(4) And I think, exhausted Brexiteers – Brexhaustion I think is the phrase – said “well, if we've got a good deal, isn't that just fantastic?” I have to say, I was very, very unhappy with this new EU Treaty with the attached Political Declaration [...] And I drew the conclusion that it simply wasn't Brexit. There were many, many concerns (Nigel Farage).

Narrative of incompetence

The arguments of incompetence, and thereby of inferiority, conceptualize the out-group as being utterly impotent vis-à-vis various aspects of Brexit and management of its consequences (which are, by definition, extremely broad, complex and varied). At the same time, it carries connotations of the lack of professionalism and malevolence (this especially in Nigel Farage's

discourse) in the sense of what the out-group is and has been unable to do or fulfil (mostly govern and protect national interests). Hence, much emphasis is put on the contentious and harmful nature of the out-group's untoward policies, views and arguments as well as its necessarily limited capacity to govern capably. On both sides, the key topics include unrealistic aims and plans (or the lack of plans), contradictory policy goals and incoherent promises. The Remain camp also puts emphasis on self-indulgence, ineptitude and inhumanity. This narrative is particularly notable in sections of the speeches in which the communicating individuals develop ideas for shared injunctive norm in terms of the desired change(s) they want to see in their country. Examples of the narrative of incompetence are apparent in excerpts (5) and (6) (Remain subcorpus) and (7) (Leave subcorpus) below.

(5) And to make things worse, this government is so lacking in talent that it employs a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who makes even Chris Grayling look like a serious figure. [...] Ireland, like Czechoslovakia in pre-war days, is seen as a faraway country of which they know nothing and care less. [...] She has revealed an ugly truth: that peace in Ireland matters less than peace in the Conservative Party (Vince Cable).

(6) There are millions of Conservative voters who are disgusted with the incompetence, the self-indulgence and the inhumanity of this Tory Government but so long as Labour appears to be a nightmare, they will cling to the Tory nurse, for fear of something worse (Vince Cable).

(7) *Of all the areas where Corbyn is content to talk this country down, there is none more ludicrous and vacillating than his policy on Brexit. In the customs union one week, out the next, in the single market, out the next. In out, in out* (Boris Johnson).

Narrative of threat

The fourth topical main focus is on threat. The narrative of threat differs from the narrative of incompetence insofar as it is more dangerous. As excerpts (8) through (11) exemplify, unlike the narrative of failure, the narrative of threat focuses on the failures to come. The out-group (and its policies) is portrayed as the source of a Brexit-related threat, as posing a threat not only to the in-group but also to the nation per se – to political, economic and social stability; prosperity; and the general British way of life. Very often we see exaggerated discourses of threat that (especially in Nigel Farage's discourse) do not function on the basis of logic or rationality but instead serve to create panic. The headings found most relevant for the analysis of the construction of the threat narrative were risk, reckless and divisive. While the Remainers work with the threats especially in a sense of reducing workers' rights, environmental protections and financial

regulations on the banks (strong especially in Tim Farron's discourse), Leavers focus mostly on the threat of a second referendum which, according to them, would be "disastrous for trust in our entire democratic system, disastrous for business, for investment into our country" (Nigel Farage) and would "frustrate the will of the people" (Boris Johnson).

(8) We keep being told, not least by the Chancellor, that once Brexit is agreed and delivered, the fog of uncertainty will lift and there will be a surge of renewed confidence in the UK [...] But this is a triumph of political fantasy over economic reality. Any well-run business can see that chronic uncertainty would follow any endorsement of the Withdrawal Agreement (Vince Cable).

(9) Conservative Brexit Government that, without us to restrain them, are showing their true colours: reckless, divisive and uncaring; prepared to risk our future prosperity for their own short-term gain (Tim Farron).

(10) It would be disastrous. And in leaving Britain in this limbo – locked in the orbit of the EU but unable to take back control. Unable to do proper free trade deals. Labour would inflict a national humiliation on a par with going cap in hand to the IMF (Boris Johnson).

(11) [...] stopping the fanatics in the Liberal Democrats who'd sign us up to everything, wouldn't they, the United States of Europe, European army, you name it, I mean they even want to revoke the result of the referendum (Nigel Farage).

Narrative of betrayal

Another semantic macro-area applied by the officeholders in their public statements on Brexit is the narrative of betrayal. As demonstrated by examples (12) and (13), central to this construction, heavily underpinned by emotions (more than the narrative of political failure), is the act of betrayal (or actions that will elicit feelings of betrayal). Here, the blame is laid at the feet of those who argued for Leave (Remain subcorpus), and those who argued for Leave and haven't been able to carry out the referendum result properly (Leave subcorpus). The main topics here are treachery (Brexit betrayal), sabotage and loyalty.

(12) The Corbyn crowd like to talk in terms of loyalty and betrayal. Well, there is no surer way to betray the people you represent than to let your opponents win (Tim Farron).

(13) Three and a half years of delay; three and a half years of a Remain Parliament; a total sellout of Brexit from Mrs May and from the

Labour Party a complete betrayal of five million of their own voters who voted Leave in that referendum, and they promised they would respect that vote (Nigel Farage).

Exclusive narratives

Apart from the four semantic macro-areas common to both sides intimidated above, there are also two more macro-areas deployed by either only Remainers or Leavers: (6) narrative of defeat (employed by the Leavers) and (7) narrative of victimizer (employed by the Remainers).

Narrative of defeat

The narrative of defeat creates an impression of the out-group as defeated by the ordinary people. It functions mainly to accentuate the change in political opportunities, thereby making the context favorable towards future action and effecting further (re)mobilization efforts of the in-group (especially in a sense of various pro-Brexit marches and rallies). The main topics include the *strength of the ordinary people*, the *oppression, rejection* and *giving back*. Example (14) illustrates this narrative rather well.

(14) Because what the little people did, what the ordinary people did – what the people who’d been oppressed over the last few years who’d seen their living standards go down did – was they rejected the multinationals, they rejected the merchant banks, they rejected big politics and they said actually, we want our country back, we want our fishing waters back, we want our borders back (Nigel Farage).

Narrative of victimizer

Constituting a form of repeated out-group discourse on the side of the Remainers (but not Leavers) is a narrative of victimizer. As in excerpt (15), Remainers background the idea that the out-group is a victimizer – someone who has inflicted deprivation on the in-group. The main topic here is that of refusal (to share, to work together).

(15) But I couldn’t work with Jeremy Corbyn, because Jeremy Corbyn would never work with me. I wanted to work with him during the referendum campaign, but he wouldn’t share a platform (Tim Farron).

In-depth analysis: linguistic means and forms of realization

The analysis that follows illustrates at least some of the most prominent linguistic means and forms of realization employed to construct the negative out-group presentation.

Importantly, the functional means of othering are marked by an us-them person deixis. Indeed, a key expression of difference is through the use of the exclusive personal “they/them” pronoun (including all the corresponding possessive pronouns). Its use is convenient, as it replaces the various differences in political beliefs, class, education, age, etc., with a simple “them”. This “them” has a number of different referents, depending on the context, but it usually and unsurprisingly refers to the group collective of the “Remainers” in the Leave subcorpus and Leavers in the Remain subcorpus.

An important means of out-group exclusion in the context of Brexit is through metonymies which enable the speakers to create the semblance of homogeneity, gloss over differences among individuals, keep them in the semantic background and treat them uniformly and undifferentiatedly as non-individuals (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 56). In so doing, both camps realize the negative other-presentation through the referential strategy known as synecdochization, making use of both particularizing synecdoche (*pars pro toto*; a part standing for the whole) and generalizing synecdoche (*totum pro parte*, the whole standing for a part). It is especially the particularizing synecdoche (such as, for instance, the Remainer, less frequently the Leaver) that provides the speaker with a means of “stereotypical generalisation and essentialisation that refer in a levelling manner to a whole group of persons” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 57). More specifically, when referring to the out-group, both camps heavily apply the strategy of politicization via the linguistic means of politonyms. These include the sub-strategies of classification (classonyms such as “the establishment”, “the class” and the “ordinary people”), party political alignment (party names [often synecdoches] such as the Tories), organizationalization (political organizationonyms such as “the government party”) and professionalization (political professiononyms such as “the prime minister” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 48–52).

Furthermore, to express negative affect and convey an image of the out-group as the despised other, both Leavers and Remainers name their opponents debasingly, derogatorily and vituperatively. It is especially the Leave politicians who use single appellative anthroponymic terms such as “Remainiac”, which are sufficient enough to perform “the othering act” on their own insofar as these forms of address connotatively convey negative, reproachful, insulting meanings, with no need for any other attributive qualifications.

As already indicated above, among the most frequent prejudiced negative traits and attributive qualifications ascribed to the out-group identified in the Leave subcorpus are fanatic, abject, in denial, angry and upset. The Remainers associate the out-group with heterogeneous mentality traits and stereotypical qualities such as xenophobic, absurd, uncaring, reckless. The Leave campaign (and especially so, Nigel Farage) also refers to the Remainer out-group by using somatonyms (anthroponyms denoting mental deficiencies), as in “fanatics”, for instance.

Often enough, however, both camps refer also to the “silent other”, pursuing negative other-presentation without an explicit referent (they). Such naming of the “other” ensures that the out-group remains nameless, with its specificity and any material particulars being completely erased. No less interestingly, it is the Leavers that more frequently address the out-group directly – as in “remember you told us we were leaving by the end of 2020; remember you told us we’re not going to have political alignment” (Nigel Farage), or “if you’re a Remainer, here’s your fear” (Nigel Farage). Notably, both Tim Farron and Vince Cable refer to Cameron’s governments (the first of which Liberal Democrats participated in) as governments, thus depicting the out-group as a collective actor that does not include themselves, even though they were part of David Cameron’s first, coalition government (2005–2010).

Finally, what is also apparent in both campaigns’ discourses is their confident approach and absence of doubt. In what can be termed as a “bald on-record strategy”, both sides usually adopted neither hedging or mitigation techniques, nor modality or modifying particles (which generally emphasize the uncertainty and subjectivity of a speaker) in order to present the out-group in any timid way.

Conclusion

Over the past couple of years, Brexit identity has become a very strong affective differentiator, with the polarization that it generates being rather intense in terms of stereotyping, emotional commitment, prejudice and various evaluative biases. Having adopted the general orientation of the DHA in Critical Discourse Analysis, this chapter has provided an empirical illustration of the multi-faceted processes of collective identity formation and meaning-making in the context of Brexit. The analysis and the examples presented all underscore the importance of context-dependency in the construction of Brexit identities and highlight the central role played by the othering here. In a summary, the analysis shows that a key structuring device in constructing Brexit identity is in-group/out-group dichotomy, with the communicating individuals viewing their perceptions, cognitions and emotions as validated/shared (or not validated/shared) against the out-group.

As shown above, the political discourse of both Leavers and Remainers is continually and abundantly replete with references to the out-groups, which are constructed not in terms of similarities, but differences. With people on both sides of the Leave-Remain divide engaging vigorously in discursive tugs-of-war with each other, the analysis demonstrates their readiness to exclude the others from their in-group as the constructed collective and to debase (and even demonize) them. In both cases, the deployed “us versus them” narratives as well as the various assertions of out-group hate/outrage effectively draw attention to opinion-based group differences, pit one group against another and create inter-group tension.

The first level of analysis looked at the main themes in the out-group discourse and identified those that are common to both camps as well as those that are unique for each (namely, the narrative of defeat in the Leave subcorpus and the narrative of victimizer in the Remain subcorpus). Taken together, these topics map out a broader story of identity realignments in the UK. An interesting feature that became apparent were the elements of active political participation as a constitutive component of the out-group's identity.

The second level of analysis focused briefly on the linguistic means and forms of realization, looking especially at the key tropes that the speakers frequently rely on to construe the imagined out-group Leaver/Remainer community. By illuminating the core discursive strategies, argumentative schemes and main representations of the other that sustained the de-legitimation of the out-group for both sides of the Brexit debate, the analysis helped to better understand the ways opinion-based groups are imagined and constructed.

Finally, there remains ample potential for further research. The next step in my research is to apply a wider notion of the "political" which focuses not merely on the public discourses of the elites in power but also analyzes other corpora such as media articles, interviews and group discussions. Factoring in other contexts as well, including private (or quasi-private) settings of different degrees of formality, will allow for a fuller and more detailed account of how Brexit identities are being formed in discourse. Moreover, with the Leave and Remain camps being extremely diverse and spanning a large spectrum of political and other expressions, addressing this diversity in out-group discourses is another issue worthy of further reflection. Lastly, it is important to bear in mind that Brexit-based identities, both on the group and individual levels, are dynamic and change over the course of time.

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