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“The United Kingdom is a different state”: Conservative MPs’ Appeals to Britishness before the EU Referendum

Nora Wenzl

This essay presents findings from a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of Conservative discourses on Brexit. Building on Stephen Reicher and Nick Hopkins’s argument that political actors can mobilize voters to act by creating a vision of the nation and the national population that makes this “action seem self-evidently in their interests” (48), this study compares Conservative Leave and Remain discourses with regard to their constructions of Britishness. To this purpose, a corpus of Hansard transcripts of oral parliamentary proceedings in the House of Commons between May 2015 and June 2016 is examined.¹ The focus lies on occurrences of the phrases “we are” and “Britain/the UK/the United Kingdom is” involved in relational processes (Halliday and Matthiessen 210-48) that characterize or identify the nation. The study shows that both sides of the debate mobilize inherently Eurosceptic narratives in their depiction of Britishness, although the Remain side does so to a lesser degree. The findings suggest that, while Leave successfully constructed a vision of Britishness that was incompatible with EU membership, the Remain side did not construct a British identity that encouraged voters to opt for Remain.

Keywords: Brexit, British identity, corpus linguistics, Critical Discourse Studies, national identity, parliamentary discourse, transitivity

¹ The Hansard transcripts constitute the official representation of parliamentary proceedings and are therefore an important channel of communication between MPs and the British public. While they are slightly edited (Slembrouck; Mollin), the changes made are mostly pragmatic in nature and therefore unlikely to affect my findings.

1 Introduction

While political commentators and scholars have identified a number of partial explanations for the outcome of the UK's EU referendum, from demographic factors (Goodwin and Heath) to dissatisfaction with the political status quo (Bourne), the only consensus seems to be that a plethora of reasons led to the referendum result. Based on Stephen Reicher and Nick Hopkins's argument that political actors strategically use identity constructions to mobilize voters, this essay examines how appeals to Britishness were used by Conservative Leave and Remain speakers in parliamentary proceedings.

To this purpose, I perform a corpus-assisted critical discourse study (Baker; Baker et al.) of Hansard transcripts covering the period between the 2015 General Election and the 2016 referendum. I focus on Conservative Members of Parliament as they were allowed to support either side of the debate, thus enabling me to compare Remain and Leave discourses of speakers with otherwise similar ideological backgrounds. Moreover, the relationship between English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, and British identities is complex, with Britishness being an Anglo-centric construct (Colley). Thus, examining Britishness in the utterances of an overwhelmingly English party has the advantage of reduced tension with individual national identities.

In what follows, I outline the conceptual framework of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and clarify the connections between discourse, identity, the nation, and politics. Section 3 discusses the method, data, and tools of analysis. The analysis presented in section 4 centres on concordance lines for "we are" and "Britain/the UK/the United Kingdom is." It examines all occurrences where the British in-group is involved in what M. A. K. Halliday and Christian Matthiessen (210-48) term "relational processes," that is, where the in-group is identified or characterized. Following Reicher and Hopkins's logic, politicians campaigning for Leave should have constructed a vision of Britishness as fundamentally incompatible with membership, while the Remain side should have done the opposite. My findings show, however, that this was only partly the case. While the Leave side mobilized historical narratives of Britishness as exceptional and incompatible with the EU, Remain employed similar narratives in its conceptions of British identity. I therefore conclude that the Remain side's vision of Britishness was at odds with continued EU membership and therefore, by extension, also with its goal to motivate voters to ensure the country remained a member.

2 Conceptual Framework

Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) sees 'discourse' as "language in speech and writing" and as a "social practice" (Fairclough and Wodak 258). Due to the dialectical relationship between discourse and its contexts of production, discourse is both influenced by the situational, institutional, and social contexts that frame it and has the power to influence non-linguistic and linguistic social practices in those contexts. Discourse can thus reproduce and transform a societal status quo. Taking an explicitly 'critical' stance indicates a commitment to exposing power structures and ideologies underlying discourse while also signalling an awareness of the complex relationships between the investigated data, its context of production and reception as well as society in general (Wodak 9). Critical analysts therefore aim to embed the discussion of text-immanent features in the wider "social and political relations, processes and circumstances" in which a discourse is embedded (Reisigl and Wodak 33). This essay, therefore, looks beyond the "text-internal context" of the investigated terms and incorporates the "broader socio-political and historical contexts" (41) of the UK's self-conception and relationship to the EU into the analysis wherever pertinent.

2.1 National Identity and Discourse

In line with previous studies on identities and discourse (Hall and Du Gay; Koller; Mole; Wodak et al.), this essay takes a constructivist approach which states that identities are constructed, relational, and context-dependent and individuals may foreground different aspects of an identity at different times. The nation, in turn, is defined as "imagined community" (Anderson): a mental construct that exists to the extent and in the form that individuals believe in and identify with (Wodak et al. 22). Discourse, then, is the element connecting the complex of beliefs about the nation with the believing individuals. This means that the nation "is constructed and conveyed in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture" (22).

The importance of (political) appeals to national identities becomes clear when viewing them through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel; Tajfel and Turner). According to SIT, individuals derive part of their self-image from their membership in groups and each group entails specific values and norms. Additionally, individuals strive to preserve or improve their own sense of self-worth (Islam 1781), which they do by

endowing their in-group with positive evaluations (e.g., by favourable comparison to an Other), while also ensuring that their actions benefit it (Tajfel).

Appeals to national identity, therefore, are potent political motivators because identification with a group provides individuals with a set of values that indicate a group's goals, and individuals wish to be able to positively evaluate their group. Moreover, *different* definitions of a nation's identity, or the foregrounding of different national characteristics, will result in *different* goals being in the nation's interests. Reicher and Hopkins thus conclude that "the way to get people to act in a given way is by providing a definition of the self that makes such action seem self-evidently in their interests" (48). They note, however, that those constructions are more successful that build on already existing and widely disseminated narratives of the nation.

Crucially, these appeals to national identities are not the exclusive domain of fringe parties or 'extreme' political groups, but are instead ubiquitous in everyday (political) discourse. The use of deictic expressions (e.g., 'us' vs. 'them') or appeals to 'the people' can be seen, Michael Billig argues, as instances of "banal nationalism" which subtly and implicitly call upon and reinforce specific interpretations of a given national identity in everyday discourse.

3 Method and Data

To base the qualitative analysis in empirical evidence, I employ methods from corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Studies (Baker; Baker et al.) and combine a quantitative overview of large amounts of data with a qualitative discussion of pertinent or frequent examples. Moreover, aspects of transitivity analysis (Halliday and Matthiessen 230-78), a method often used in CDS, are employed in the analysis. This essay is based on a corpus of Hansard transcripts of oral parliamentary proceedings in the House of Commons, spanning the period from 7 May 2015 – the first relevant sitting after the 2015 General Election – to 15 June 2016 – the last relevant sitting before the referendum on 23 June 2016. The 'relevance' of proceedings was established by referring to the title of the transcript, with all titles referring explicitly to the UK-EU relationship being chosen. Transcripts were downloaded from the Hansard webpage as text files and mark-up was performed in Notepad++ (Ho). Sub-corpora consisting of all utterances by members of each party were extracted using the Multilingual Corpus Toolkit

(Piao). The Conservative sub-corpus was further marked up with information regarding each speaker's stance on Brexit,² and the Conservative Remain and Leave corpora were created. Corpus analysis was conducted using AntConc (Anthony).

The Brexit corpus comprises 1,104,324 tokens (running words after mark-up), with the Conservative sub-corpus accounting for 62% (674,413 tokens). Of these, the Conservative Remain corpus makes up 56% (379,939 tokens) and the Leave corpus accounts for 44% (293,241 tokens).

The investigation of transitivity aims to discover, in crude terms, "who did what to whom and in what circumstances" (Thompson 32). While Halliday and Matthiessen distinguish between six process types (169-305), the focus of this essay is on relational processes, as these are of particular relevance to the question of how Britishness is portrayed in the data. Relational processes "serve to characterize and to identify" (259) an actor or thing by assigning either class membership or identity to it. There are three subtypes – intensive, possessive, and circumstantial – all three of which may be realized as *attributive* – assigning a category – or *identifying* – assigning a unique identity. Table 1 provides an overview.

	(i) Attributive "a is an attribute of X"	(ii) Identifying "a is the identity of x"
(1) Intensive "x is a"	Sarah is wise	Sarah is the leader; the leader is Sarah
(2) Possessive "x has a"	Peter has a piano	the piano is Peter's; Peter's is the piano
(3) Circumstantial "x is at a"	the fair is on a Tues- day	tomorrow is the 10th; the 10th is tomorrow

Table 1. Overview of relational processes (Halliday and Matthiessen 265)

Most notable in the context of my data are non-reversible intensive attributive relational processes realized with an adjective, such as "we are not powerless" or a noun, as in "we are a leading player in climate change diplomacy." Additionally, there are some notable occurrences of reversible intensive identifying relational processes, which are realized

² Speaker stance on the EU as of 22 June 2016 was taken from the BBC's databank (BBC).

with a definite article and noun, such as “we are the fifth largest economy in the world.” Lastly, attributive circumstantial relational processes, realized with a prepositional or adverbial phrase, as in “Britain is outside the EU,” also occurred several times. The focus of this essay will thus be on these three sub-categories of relational processes. Since the number of possessive relational processes in the data is negligible, these will not be discussed here.

For the analysis, concordance lines were generated for the phrases “Britain/the UK/the United Kingdom is” and “we are.” Regarding the latter, only concordance lines where the pronoun was interpreted to stand for the entire UK or the British population were analysed.³ In a last step, all concordance lines where the search queries were part of future constructions were excluded. Table 2 shows the number of concordance lines taken into consideration for each search query, as well as the final number analysed once future constructions were excluded.

	Leave	Remain
we are	375	678
Britain is	13	46
the UK is	16	35
the United Kingdom is	6	17
	407	776
future constructions	-37	-83
concordance lines analysed	370	693

Table 2. Number of concordance lines generated and analysed

³ The referential range was determined, in line with Jane Mulderrig’s similar study, by taking into account textual anchors, while excluding those instances where logic dictated that the referential range did not include the wider public. See also Wenzl (“This”).

4 Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Analysis of Process Types

For the analysis, a five-word span to the right of the search queries was initially considered, but extended to ten words where necessary. Of the 693 concordance lines for Remain, 364, or 53%, depicted the country as involved in a relational process, while the number was slightly lower for the Leave side with 181 lines, or 49%. While the dominance of relational processes is partially explained by the nature of the search queries – this type of process is frequently realized with a form of ‘to be’ – the number also suggests that characterizations and identifications of the nation played an important role in the run-up to the EU referendum.

Regarding the Leave data, 65% of relational processes were intensive attributive, realized with adjectives or nouns. In contrast, only 11% of relational processes could be categorized as intensive identifying. Approximately a quarter of analysed Leave concordances for relational processes was accounted for by attributive circumstantial processes. With 71%, the Remain data contains more intensive attributive relational processes, but only 7% of the remaining relational processes are made up by intensive identifying ones. Lastly, slightly less than one fifth of relational processes are categorized as attributive circumstantial. In other words, the dominance of intensive attributive relational processes shows that Leave, and to an even greater extent Remain, exhibit a preoccupation with classifying the in-group by describing what sort of country the United Kingdom is with a noun phrase or ascribing characteristics to the we-group with adjectives. The smaller numbers of intensive identifying processes, which are all realized with noun phrases, by contrast, suggest that there is less interest in ascribing a unique and fixed identity to the nation, although Leave does this slightly more than Remain. Additionally, the sizeable number of circumstantial relational processes reveals that both sides characterize the nation or its population by – usually metaphorically – positioning them in spatial or temporal terms. Table 3 presents an overview of the occurrences of the various sub-types of relational processes. The following section will now move on to a discussion of pertinent topics in the data. In the following sections, an analysis of dominant themes in the Leave and Remain data is presented, beginning with a quantitative overview and moving on to a qualitative analysis. Due to the negligible number of possessive processes, they will be disregarded.

		Leave	Remain
intensive	attributive	68 (adjective) 49 (noun)	180 (adjective) 79 (noun)
	identifying	20 (noun)	28 (noun)
circumstantial	attributive	41	69
	identifying	0	0
possessive	attributive	3	8
	identifying	0	0
		181	364

Table 3. Number of concordance lines of relational process sub-types

4.2 Qualitative Analysis of Dominant Themes

When considering how the nation is characterized and described in the Leave and Remain data, three general themes emerge. Firstly, 43% of all characterizations, both in the Leave and in the Remain data, portray Britain in terms of its strengths and positive attributes. In contrast, only 9% of Leave data and 7% of Remain data highlight British weaknesses. While the numbers and concrete contents of these two categories do diverge slightly between the two sides of the debate, the third topic shows the most notable differences. This third topic, which accounts for 50% and 44% of analysed data in the Leave and Remain corpus, respectively, defines Britishness in terms of its international connections and memberships. The remaining 6% of Leave and 3% of Remain data are categorized as “other.” It must be noted that the category of “connections,” unlike the other two, is neither clearly positive nor negative. Instead it contains data that portrays the nation as strong and connection as positive, as well as utterances that see connections as burdensome or even threatening and the nation as powerless. The decision not to incorporate these data points into the other two categories was made due to the centrality of the topic of EU membership and other international connections to the topic under investigation. Moreover, by coincidence more than by design, it is this category that displays some of the most pertinent differences between the two sides. Tables 4 and 5 present a quantitative overview of the occurrence of topics and sub-topics for Leave and Remain. The

following will now discuss relevant patterns for the two dominant topics – British strengths and connections – in some detail, beginning with Leave. For reasons of scope and clarity, the analysis will be a synthesis of themes in all relational processes according to topic.

	strengths						weak- nesses		connection					oth er
total occurrence of topic ⁴	77						16		90					10
realized with:	self-confidence	determination	fortune	leadership	economy	progress	worry	misfortune	memberships	freedom/opt- outs/disconnect	better off in	entrapment	connection (gen- eral)	
adjectives	8	14	3	0	0	0	5	0	0	4	8	28	11	2
nouns	4	0	0	13	23	0	2	0	17	5	0	0	0	5
prepositions	0	0	0	2	1	9	9	0	9	8	0	0	0	3
	12	14	3	15	24	9	16	0	26	17	8	28	11	10

Table 4. LEAVE – topics and sub-topics

⁴ Note that this number exceeds the number of concordances because of occurrences with more than one adjective within the five-word span of the node.

	strengths						weak- nesses	connection						oth- -er
total occurrence of topic	157						26	161						12
realized with:	self-confidence	determination	fortune	leadership	economy	progress	worry	misfortune	memberships	outs/disconnect	freedom/opt-	better off in	entrapment	connection (gen- erally)
adjectives	35	33	8	0	0	0	14	0	0	12	46	7	18	7
nouns	5	0	0	31	20	0	3	0	19	19	0	0	7	3
prepositions	0	0	0	9	0	16	0	9	10	16	0	0	7	2
	40	33	8	40	20	16	17	9	29	47	46	7	32	12

Table 5. REMAIN – topics and sub-topics

4.2.1 Leave

4.2.1.1 Britain as Exceptional

Of the concordance lines investigated for Leave, 43% highlight Britain's strengths. Thus, analysis of adjectives shows that the country is described, amongst others, as "strong," "able," "fair," "bold," and "proud." The noun phrases used to describe the nation grant even more insight, as they show a preoccupation with British leadership as well as the nation's economic power. Regarding the latter, speakers consistently highlight the nation's economic strength to underline the argument that the UK cannot only prosper outside the EU, but that it will also have no difficulty in negotiating trade deals with other nations. Thus, the country is defined in terms of its ability to acquire capital and export goods, being described as "a trading nation," "a prosperous country," or "a thoroughly investable economy." Moreover, Britain's position as "the fifth largest economy in the world" receives particular stress, and is mentioned nine times. The relative size of Britain's economy is

referenced as inspiring optimism in the respective speakers, who cite it as a reason why other nations should be more than willing to trade with the UK post-Brexit. This argument is also expressed by referring to the UK's status as a "customer" [3] to other European nations, thereby implying that those nations exporting to the UK need the country more than it does them.⁵ There is thus an underlying sense of the supremacy of Britain in these utterances that mobilizes traditional conceptions of the British as trading nation (Colley). Although never voiced explicitly, celebrations of British commerce as the key to prosperity post-Brexit play with visions of the country returning to its former glory during the days of Empire.

With regard to leadership, elements of British exceptionalism emerge as the nation is positioned as superior to the rest of the world by highlighting that it is "a key player" or "Europe's leader." Moreover, descriptions of the country as "a great country" and "a big hitter in its own right," "a self-confident, successful nation," and a "healthier democracy" now than it used to be play into what is termed the "Whig" interpretation of British history.⁶ This long-established Anglo-centric narrative celebrates the country as being on an inexorable path towards greater enlightenment, liberty, and democracy and constructs Britain in contrast to mainland Europe (Spiering 54). Reiterations of these historical and widely disseminated narratives thus always entail implicit conceptions of the UK as un-European.

The Whiggish idea of a nation on the constant path to progress becomes even more evident when regarding circumstantial relational processes. Nine times, the nation is (metaphorically) positioned as being either at the beginning or in the midst of a process of change and transformation. Much as in the example above, the idea is expressed – explicitly and implicitly – that circumstances have changed since the EU began, and once-beneficial aspects of membership are no longer necessary in the "new" or "different world" in which the UK finds itself now.

Lastly, depictions of the we-group as "determined" [2] to resist the EU and "not prepared" to adhere to (supposedly) unjust EU rulings portray the British as rebellious and just. Although this topic only occurs fourteen times in the data examined here, analysis of the portrayal of "the [British] people" (Wenzl, "There") has shown that drawing on associations of Britishness with justice and rebellion was a potent mobili-

⁵ Numbers in square brackets indicate more than one occurrence. No numbers are given for single occurrences.

⁶ See also Matthias D. Berger's contribution in this volume.

zation tool employed by Leave speakers. Menno Spiering highlights the long tradition of this narrative by arguing that the British island nation story entails the idea that islanders must defend their separate status and freedom with particular ferocity (30-43). Reiterating narratives of British rebellion against the yoke of European tyranny thus allows speakers to mobilize not only a narrative of positive self-portrayal for the population, but also to offer a vote for Brexit as the ‘natural’ enactment of traits ascribed to the British.

4.2.1.2 Britain as Connected but Trapped

The category of “connections,” which makes up half of all Leave data analysed, is also the most fuzzy, as it contains representations of connections both as strengthening and as threatening the nation. Since a key argument against EU membership brought forth by Leave was the fact that the UK is sufficiently important on the world stage to make the EU unnecessary for the country’s success, there are frequent enumerations of the inter- and supra-national organizations that the UK is a member of in the data. Thus, Britain is described as being “a member of many prominent international organisations” and indeed, “a member of more international organisations [...] than any other country.” On two occasions, a wealth of organizations is listed to bolster the argument of the country’s international influence. In these cases, membership of supranational organizations is presented as strengthening the country. Additionally, the emphasis on the sheer number of organizations and the explicit mentions of the fact that the UK is member of an especially large number of them also serve to highlight the country’s exceptional role on the world stage. Despite the Remain side’s argument that the EU lends influence to the UK, it is suggested, the country is, in fact, influential and connected *without* the EU.

When EU membership is mentioned in the Leave data, it is often connected to restrictions imposed by the EU. The argument is made that, far from giving the UK influence in the world’s largest trading bloc, EU membership is in fact meaningless as the country only represents “one vote out of 28” on European issues. On another occasion, the Remain argument that membership of the largest single market in the world is beneficial to the UK is refuted by arguing that the EU is, in fact, only this powerful *because* Britain is a member. According to this logic, it is the UK that endows the rest of Europe with trading power,

and not the other way around, reinforcing the narrative of the British trading nation.

A striking aspect of the Leave side's depiction of British connections surfaces in relation to the adjectives the nation is associated with. While there are three occurrences where connection is described in positive terms, with the nation positioned as "not alone," "connected," and "engaged" in co-operation, a staggering twenty-eight adjectives depict connection to the EU with adjectives that have very negative connotations. Thus, words of entrapment such as "locked into" [2], "barred," "bound," "captive," or "trapped" portray the nation as powerless in the face of the EU (Wenzl, "This") while simultaneously mobilizing the common metaphor of the EU as a prison that has also been traced in right-wing newspaper discourses of the EU (Islentyeva).

Lastly, 8% of the data in the "connections" category for Leave shows the country as *disconnected* or free by mentioning the UK's opt-outs from Schengen, the Euro, and ever-closer union. Since these three projects are central to the EU, Leave speakers generally express their relief at not participating in them and use the opt-outs to emphasize British difference from continental Europe. On a few occasions, however, the prospect of being forced to join the Euro or the nation's inability to escape from growing political integration are constructed as consequences of remaining that present a threat to the nation's well-being.

4.2.2 Remain

4.2.2.1 Britain as ... Exceptional, Too!

Of the investigated Remain data, 43% highlight British strengths, and the country's current state seems to inspire optimism in Remainers as much as in Leave speakers. The adjectives describing the nation construct it as a self-assured country that is "able" [15], "proud" [3], "right" [2] in its decisions, and "tough" [2] in their implementation, as well as "confident," "great," and "successful." Additionally, words like "fortunate" [3], "happy," or "grateful" point to the UK's positive role in the world and construct being British as a stroke of good fortune. By stressing that the UK's population is "privileged to live in a country where anyone [...] can [...] achieve their dreams" and "fortunate to live in a country in which politicians do not direct the legal process," the democratic process is highlighted and the country represented as a

meritocracy. On two more occasions, speakers label the country “fortunate” for its excellent international relations, while another professes national pride in the NHS. All of these portrayals, apart from perhaps the last, show clear traces of the Whig narrative and thus betray some inherent Euroscepticism.

Like Leave speakers, Remain supporters portray Britain as determined, although they do so not to signal rebelliousness but to express plans for the country’s future. This is done by stating that the we-group is “clear” [13] about its wishes or “keen” [5] and “ready” [2] to do something as well as “committed” [6] and “determined” [3] to reach its goals. The country (standing in for its leaders) is thus represented as strong-willed and clear-minded; a nation that knows what it wants and takes steps to achieve its goals. Nonetheless, the depiction of a nation of pragmatists that pursue their goal with logic instead of passion also mobilizes narratives of the rational Brit, familiar from Leave discourses.

British determination is expressed even more clearly on occasions where the nation is positioned as a leader in international politics. Descriptions of Britain as a “world leader,” a “leading player in climate change,” and as “at the forefront” [4] of various developments explicitly assign this role. Even more frequently, however, the nation’s leading position is not mentioned explicitly, but implied by emphasizing that Britain is “the first” or “only” to implement environmental policies or donate a promised amount to the Syrian aid effort. Furthermore, the we-group is identified as “the ones in the vanguard” regarding conflict in the Ukraine, “the ones making the argument” concerning sanctions against Russia, or, five times, as “the second biggest bilateral donor.” Throughout these utterances, the UK is positioned not only at the forefront of global events, but also singled out as different and apart from the rest of the world. British accomplishments are highlighted, and they often relate to topics such as security, climate change or international aid, and the eradication of poverty. Thus, the country is indirectly branded as progressive and charitable, contributing to causes which might be interpreted as morally good. By implication, Britain is therefore positioned not merely as a world leader, but as a *moral* leader, using its wealth to do good deeds around the world. This vision of Britain can be traced back to interpretations of the British Empire that not only represented a process by which British virtues, liberty, and wealth were transmitted to deprived foreign regions (Parkeh 35), but which was also portrayed as benign enterprise, spread by trade and not armies (Armitage 8).

In addition to positioning the country as a moral leader, depictions of Britain as “the fifth largest economy in the world” [3] and a “powerful and growing economy” as well as a “massive recipient” [3] of foreign direct investment in the EU also highlight its role as an economic leader. Thus, the vision of Britain as a powerful trading nation with a glorious future is also mobilized in Remain discourses. But despite the parallels to Leave discourses, there is an essential difference in the representation of the country’s economic situation: its well-being is frequently tied up with the EU. Thus, two of the three iterations of “the fifth largest economy in Europe” question whether this is a convincing reason to leave the EU – as the Leave side makes it out to be – and instead suggest that British economic success might be caused by EU membership. Similarly, the large amount of direct investment that the country is receiving is twice attributed to the fact that the UK is part of the European customs union.

And yet, even in the Remain data, there are counter-examples where speakers do not connect economic success to EU membership and therefore argue that the UK should *not* remain a member merely for economic reasons. The third occurrence of “the fifth largest economy,” for instance, is used by the speaker to stress that they “will never argue that Britain could not survive outside the European Union” because its economic power means that it could well do so. Similarly, a speaker highlighting the UK’s “massive” receipt of investment states that, despite others’ arguments, uncertainty over a potential Brexit would not cause investors to take their money elsewhere. To sum up, therefore, Remain speakers put strong emphasis on the country’s role as an international leader, both in moral and in economic terms. Opinions diverge, however, on whether there is a connection between the country’s strong economic standing and EU membership.

4.2.2.2 Britain as a Reluctant and Pragmatic European

While the Remain side utilized many of the same Eurosceptic narratives that the Leave side did, it is in the category of international connections, which accounts for 44% of the analysed Remain data, that the most striking differences between the two sides become apparent. Before discussing those, however, one parallel must be mentioned. Of the nineteen occasions where the nation is assigned the category of “member,” “part,” or “signatory” of an international group or project, only ten position the nation explicitly as EU member. Similarly, half of

the ten circumstantial processes that spatially position the nation “in” something actually portray the country not unequivocally as member but as being hypothetically in limbo between being “in or out.” Like Leave speakers, Remainers thus frequently question the country’s membership, while enumerating its many connections to other international organizations. Implicitly, the importance of membership for the nation is thereby lessened (Wenzl, “This”).

While Leave seems preoccupied with the metaphor of the EU as a prison, the Remain corpus contains only seven occurrences of similar language of entrapment. Although the nation is depicted as “bound” [2] and “tied,” the use of the more benign “required” and particularly “compliant” [2] suggests at least a measure of voluntary co-operation. Moreover, several more adjectives depict connection in more neutral, even positive, terms, with words like “involved” [3], “engaged” [2], and “supportive” [2] suggesting wilful participation of the British in international projects. A similar spirit of co-operation is apparent in circumstantial representations, where the UK is positioned as “there for” various aspects of the EU [4]. Moreover, the argument is made twice that being “around the table” of EU members enhances British international influence, while the opposite is the case when Britain is “not around the table” or “not at the heart of what is going on.”

Another noticeable pattern in the Remain data that is almost absent in the Leave corpus is the use of the comparative forms “better,” “safer,” or “stronger” in connection with EU membership, as in “we are safer, stronger and better in the European Union.” In all, there are forty-six occurrences of one or all of these words (or similar formulations), and more than half are accounted for by a statement to the effect that the UK is “better (off)” inside the European Union. This is partially explained by the fact that “better off in” was one of the Remain side’s campaign slogans, with the official campaign being called “Britain stronger in Europe.” Remarkably, however, closer examination shows that these phrases entail relatively few unequivocal embraces of membership. Instead, the phrase mostly occurs attributed to non-British heads of state or as part of a neutral ‘in-or-out’ question (Wenzl, “This”).

In an even more striking difference to Leave discourses, Remain speakers explicitly position the UK and its citizens as “free” [3], while also evaluating British opt-outs not as threats, but as opportunities to make membership work for the UK. Nonetheless, the nation’s opt-outs from EU regulations are emphasized with an astounding frequency and speakers stress that the UK is “carved-out” [3] of certain processes,

“not compelled” to join Schengen, “not involved” in the Eurozone or “blocked off” from routes to further integration with Brussels. This pattern becomes even more distinct when the country is positioned as “not part of” or “not a member of” the group of Schengen countries [12], the Eurozone [2], ever-closer union [2], Frontex [2], and the European quota system to deal with refugees. Unlike the Leave side, which claim that the UK’s numerous opt-outs are evidence of the country’s unwillingness to remain in Europe, Remain speakers often construct opt-outs as a reason to stay. On several occasions, for instance, the opt-out from Schengen is cited to refute the Leave argument that the country needs to ‘take back control,’ and is linked to a vision of Britain as un-bound and self-determined.

Despite the positive framing of opt-outs, emphasis on them defines the nation in terms of what it is not part of – and what it is not part of are, in fact, key European Union projects. The Remain side’s view on EU membership is thus revealed to be that of a pragmatic union that is meant to serve its members and not the other way around. Oliver J. Daddow terms this neither decidedly Europhile nor passionately Eurosceptic view “revisionist” and traces it throughout discourses on the Union since 1945 (114). It must be noted, however, that although this view holds that EU membership should be the result of a thorough cost-benefit analysis instead of passionate sentiment (Gibbins 22), the portrayal of the British as supremely rational actually stems from cultural narratives that contrast British ‘common sense’ with continental irrationality and amorality (Spiering 55, 56). In short, the pragmatic interpretation of membership, which at first glance appears neutral, is in fact steeped in Eurosceptic narratives of the British. Furthermore, by stressing British opt-outs, speakers highlight Britain’s positions on the – metaphorical and geographical – margins of the Union and inadvertently portray the nation as, at best, “reluctant” Europeans (Riihimäki).

Although these formulations emphasize British exceptionalism, the EU is painted in a more friendly light than in the Leave data. By stressing that the country is “not bound” [2] by certain treaties and “not obliged” to do what other members do, speakers portray the EU as an institution that is a “non-radical Other” (Gibbins 17), allowing its members freedom, instead of ‘imprisonment.’ The sense of co-operation is strengthened by speakers stating that the country is now “far more immersed in Brussels” and thus more influential, “committed to cutting red tape” to improve the bureaucratic situation on an EU level and “proud to be part of the discussion” on the circular economy. Nonetheless, emphasizing the need to reform the EU for membership to be

beneficial also betrays dissatisfaction with the current state of the Union (see also Wenzl, “This”). To sum up, while Remain depictions show that one can co-operate with the EU, a clear division between the UK and other members is created by the emphasis on opt-outs and Britain’s exceptional leadership role. Thus, while the EU and its members might be a benevolent Other, they must remain, irrevocably, Other.

5 Conclusion

A (brief) transitivity analysis of concordance lines for “we are” and “Britain/the UK/the United Kingdom is” shows a clear dominance of relational processes in both data sets, suggesting a preoccupation of Conservative Members of Parliament on both sides with characterizing or identifying the nation. By (re)defining the nation while making their case for or against EU membership, speakers have the chance to create a vision of Britishness that enforces their argument by constructing leaving or remaining, respectively, as in line with the national character and in the nation’s best interest.

My analysis shows, however, that only the Leave side was truly successful in this endeavour. Leave speakers consistently constructed the UK as exceptional and superior to other nations by emphasizing its leading role in the international community as well as its economic strength. A nation as successful and internationally connected as Britain, they argue, does not need the crutch of EU membership to remain prosperous. Visions of Britain as a thriving trading nation post-Brexit enable Leave speakers to hint at the possibility of reliving the glory of Empire. Additionally, Leave discourses generally convey a sense of optimism regarding post-Brexit Britain and mobilize Whig narratives of the nation on an inexorable path to liberty and prosperity, and away from Europe. The EU itself is characterized as a prison that diminishes the country’s international significance. The positioning of the British as rebellious and unwilling to tolerate injustice, moreover, is perfectly aligned with the Leave side’s goal to motivate the population to vote against EU membership.

Somewhat surprisingly, the difference from Remain discourses is one of degree and not of kind. Remainers, too, mobilize narratives of Whiggishness and Empire by stressing the nation’s exceptional role in the world and positioning Britain as a moral leader. Although some speakers argue that EU membership is the reason for Britain’s economic success, opinions on the necessity of the EU diverge within the Remain camp

and the representation of Britain as self-confident and strong does not always easily lend itself to bolstering pro-European arguments. Regarding the UK-EU relationship, a spirit of co-operation is evident in the relative absence of a language of entrapment as well as the emphasis on the willingness to work together. However, British opt-outs from EU projects are highlighted with striking frequency. While they are generally depicted as positive, the pragmatic view of membership as the result of thorough cost-benefit analyses and the positioning of Brits as supremely rational portrays the nation as reluctant Europeans. Moreover, the renewed emphasis on British exceptionalism betrays a lack of enthusiasm for the EU on the part of Remainers and positions the nation firmly as different and apart from the Continent. Needless to say, these constructions of Britishness, combined with conflicting representations of the necessity of the EU, do not encourage passion for the EU project. In fact, they do not even suggest that membership is in the nation's best interest.

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