



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-2021-25-3-645-662>

Research article

The UK as victim and hero in the Sun's coverage of the Brexit 'humiliation'

Franco ZAPPETTINI

University of Liverpool
Liverpool, UK

Abstract

This paper discusses how emotions were mobilised by the British tabloid press as discursive strategies of persuasion during the public debate on the implementation of Brexit. Using the case study of the Sun's coverage of the alleged UK's 'humiliation' at the Salzburg meeting (2018) during the Brexit negotiations, the analysis addresses the questions of how and through which linguistic means actors and events were framed discursively in such an article. The findings suggest that The Sun elicited emotions of fear, frustration, pride, and freedom to frame Brexit along a long-established narrative of domination and national heroism. The discourse was also sustained by a discursive prosody in keeping with a satirical genre and a populist register that have often characterised the British tabloid press. In particular the linguistic analysis has shown how antagonistic representations of the UK and the EU were driven by an allegory of 'incompetent' gangsterism and morally justified resistance. Emotionalisation in the article was thus aimed both at ridiculing the EU and at representing it as a criminal organisation. Such framing was instrumental in pushing the newspaper agenda as much as in legitimising and institutionalising 'harder' forms of Brexit with the tabloid's readership. Approaching journalist discourse at the intersection of affective, stylistic, and political dimensions of communication, this paper extends the body of literature on the instrumental use of emotive arguments and populist narratives and on the wider historical role of tabloid journalism in representing political relations between the UK and the EU.

Keywords: *Brexit, political communication, media linguistics, tabloid journalism, Critical Discourse Analysis*

For citation:

Zeppetini, Franco. 2021. The UK as victim and hero in the Sun's coverage of the Brexit 'humiliation'. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25 (3). 645–662. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-2021-25-3-645-665>

Научная статья

Великобритания как жертва и герой в освещении Брексита газетой "Sun"

Франко ЗАППЕТТИНИ

Ливерпульский университет
Ливерпуль, Великобритания

Аннотация

Статья посвящена роли эмоций в дискурсивных стратегиях убеждения. В ней рассматривается, как во время публичных дебатов по вопросу Брексита британская таблоидная пресса использовала эмоции для продвижения данной идеи. На примере освещения газетой "Sun"

«унижения» Великобритании на переговорах по Брекситу в Зальцбурге (2018) исследуется, как и с помощью каких языковых средств были дискурсивно оформлены акторы и описываемые события. Полученные данные свидетельствуют о том, что газета “Sun” вызывала у читателей эмоции страха и разочарования наряду с чувством гордости и свободы, чтобы связать Брексит с давно устоявшимся нарративом доминирования и национального героизма. Дискурс также подкреплялся дискурсивной просодией в сочетании с сатирическим жанром и популистским регистром, которые часто характеризуют британскую бульварную прессу. В частности, лингвистический анализ показал, как антагонистические образы Великобритании и ЕС подкреплялись аллегорией «некомпетентного» гангстеризма и морально оправданным сопротивлением. Таким образом, эмоционализация была нацелена как на высмеивание ЕС, так и на изображение ЕС как преступной организации, что сыграло важную роль в продвижении идеи Брексита среди читателей таблоида, а также легитимации и институционализации его более жестких форм. Рассматривая журналистский дискурс с учетом эмоционального, стилистического и политического аспектов коммуникации, данное исследование расширяет представление об использовании эмоциональных аргументов и популистских нарративов, а также подчеркивает роль бульварной журналистики в представлении политических отношений между Великобританией и ЕС.

Ключевые слова: *Брексит, политическая коммуникация, медиалингвистика, бульварная журналистика, эмоционализация, критический дискурс-анализ*

Для цитирования:

Zappettini F. The UK as victim and hero in the Sun’s coverage of the Brexit ‘humiliation’. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*. 2021. Vol. 25. № 3. P. 645–662. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-2021-25-3-645-662>

1. Introduction: Language and emotions in the news

A large body of literature has shown the complex interplay between affective, cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions of communication, and how emotional language is part and parcel of every-day mediated representations (Mackenzie & Alba-Juez 2019, Foolen 2012, Niemeier & Driven 1997, Martin & White 2005, Wierzbicka 1999, van Dijk 2013). Different linguistic/semiotic features of discourse can encode specific emotional stances; they can be used to convey different aspects of reality and influence how we make sense of events and the world. This, in turn, can have significant social and political implications as public discourse can be used persuasively to shape attitudes and lead to actions (Ponton 2020, Larina, Ponton & Ozyumenko 2020) and since citizens tend to participate in political life primarily driven by feelings rather than rationality (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019) especially in populist discourses. Although the question of representations and the so called ‘media effect’ (i.e., the role of media in instigating, influencing, and reinforcing certain worldviews) have been long debated in academia (including issues of interpretation and audience reception) the way in which actors are represented and in which events are framed by the media – and how this is evoked through emotions – has received close examination by linguists and social scientists alike. For example, the language of the news has increasingly been scrutinised (White 2020, Hameleers et al. 2016, Bell 1996, Bednarek & Caple 2014, van Dijk 2013) as it often goes beyond reporting facts, with editorial and opinion pieces in which journalists’ narratives – underpinned by specific values and

schemas shared within a discursive community – co-construct emotions with like-minded addressees and target audiences so that mediated language can ultimately contribute to legitimise collective feelings.

The analysis of media language in relation to Brexit has produced an abundant output in different fields at the intersection of linguistics and political communication (e.g., Koller, Kopf & Miglbauer 2019, Buckledee 2019, Maccaferri 2019, Zappettini & Krzyzanowski 2019, Zappettini 2020, 2021, Bennett 2019, Brusenbauch Meislova 2019, Charteris-Black 2019, Musolff 2017, 2019, Dancygier 2021, this issue). This paper corroborates and takes forward the existing literature by focusing on one case study of how emotions around the alleged ‘humiliation’ of Britain at the Salzburg meeting (see below) were mobilised in the Sun, one of best-selling British tabloids. Although this paper is only able to discuss one article given the necessary trade-off between breadth and depth of analysis, my point is to show that The Sun’s article is representative of the overall *emotional coverage of Brexit* in a large section of the tabloid press (for a larger discussion see Zappettini, forthcoming). More significantly, the use of emotions in the press coverage can be interpreted as part of the *pre-legitimation* and the subsequent ‘*chain of legitimacy*’ (Zappettini, forthcoming) that has sustained the *critical juncture*¹ of Brexit (Zappettini & Krzyzanowski 2019) and normalised ‘harder’ forms of Brexit after the referendum. In other words, the alleged ‘humiliation’ of Britain can be seen as concatenated into the larger populist narrative that has portrayed the UK as vexed/ostracised by the EU resulting in Brexit being framed by the majority of tabloids as a heroic act of national pride and independence – or as ‘Britain freeing itself from the EU’s shackles’ (see Zappettini 2019). Such framing of Britain’s ‘humiliation’, I argue, boosted already existing attitudes to Brexit that The Sun had been priming onto its readership through years of negative coverage of the EU/UK relationship and through narratives of victimisation of the UK by the Brussels and Westminster ‘elites’ (see Zappettini & Krzyzanowski 2019, Zappettini 2021).

By providing a window on the language of Brexit in tabloids, the rationale for my analysis is to show that the media have been key actors in the UK’s departure from the EU for they have not simply acted as platforms reverberating and amplifying different political messages, but crucially because they have in fact pushed their own ideological agenda to legitimise and institutionalise specific populist imaginaries of Brexit leveraging on certain dominant logics and emotions (e.g. freedom, rupture, emancipation). The intended contribution of my analysis is therefore an understanding of the pragmatics of emotions at the intersection of consumption and production of media and political discourses (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). Here, therefore I take Brexit as a case study of *emotive* rather than *emotional* communication (Alba-Juez & Larina 2018) to highlight the conscious mobilisation of emotions for communicative purposes in which the newsworthiness of a piece is often driven by the newspaper’s very own political and commercial agenda.

¹ Critical juncture refers to the process of institutionalization of specific social, political and cultural visions of reality sustained by the acceleration of a discursive path/trajectory (see Zappettini and Krzyzanowski, 2019).

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Features of tabloid journalism and its role in Brexit are discussed in section 2 which also provides some background on the events covered in the news article analysed (reproduced in Appendix 1). The analytical approach is discussed in section 3 followed by a discussion of the findings in section 4 and conclusions in section 5.

2. The discourse of tabloids and the critical juncture of Brexit

Arguably, no country is characterized by its popular national press culture more than Britain is by its tabloids. In a country where people read more newspapers per head than any other nation and where five national tabloid titles reach around 85% of the entire readership (Bingham & Conboy, 2015) the role of the tabloid press can hardly be overestimated. The popular press has played a key role in how millions of British people have been informed about and made sense of the world around them, its social and political life. Significantly, over time, different titles have pushed different political agendas and heavily influenced and divided public opinion. This has increasingly been the case as newspapers have become industrial and commercial ventures and different tabloid titles were born to support and reflect different social attitudes and ideologies (Bingham and Conboy 2015). Since Alfred Harmsworth initially launched *The Daily Mail* in 1896 on the model of right-wing populist Sunday newspapers and the American press Tabloid format (12'×16') other titles followed his successful formula, for example *The Daily Express* which was established in 1900. This was followed by a second wave emerging in the 1930s with Labour-supporting titles such as *The Daily Herald* and *Daily Mirror*. Finally, the 1970s saw the arrival of Murdoch's *The Sun* which over the years has repeatedly swayed its political support between the Tories and Labour.

Tabloid journalism constitutes a genre of its own vis-à-vis the so-called 'quality press' being characterised by certain distinctive features. In ideological terms, tabloid journalism understands its own social role in opposition to the "excesses of political correctness and [...] liberal intellectualism" (Krämer 2018: 15) rather than the duty to promote an informed democratic dialogue among citizens. Tabloids typically use a discursive style aimed at creating newsworthiness around a mix of 'soft' content (e.g., celebrities and gossip), hard facts and opinions which often compress complex arguments into simplistic evaluations and catchy lines (Conboy 2004). Tabloids are prominently known for their *demotic* (or vernacular) discursive register characterised by highly emotive, sensational, and everyday language. This language is often found in headlines relying on puns, wordplay, rhyming and alliteration designed as forms of entertainment, humour and satire attuning to the folk culture of the intended readership. Different studies have highlighted the simplistic conceptual categories and colloquial, emotional, evaluative vocabulary (such as *punks*, *nuts*, *perverts*, *bonkers*, *thugs*) used by tabloids (Conboy 2004). Similarly, sensational language to maximise the story's newsworthiness (e.g. *scandal*, *fury*, *outrage*, *secret*, *revealed*, *shocking*, *exclusive*) has been prevalent in the tabloid press (Schaffer 1995). Tabloids' evaluative

language is also less nuanced compared to that of broadsheet – for example disagreements or debates will tend to be referred to as *rows, fury, feuds* while to criticise someone will be reported as *to slam, lash, rap, lambast*, etc. Two-word noun phrases are also used to represent/evaluate social actors (e.g., *miracle baby survives plane crash; innocent bystanders witnessed the attack*) while unconventional spelling is frequent for politicians' names such as *Jez* for Jeremy Corbyn, *Maggie* for Margaret Thatcher and so on. Another conspicuous feature of the tabloid press has been the explicit 'male gaze' taken by these publications (for example The Sun is well known for publishing topless models on its page three) and, in general, the trivialisation and sexualisation of political issues (which dovetails with the ideological 'politically incorrect' approach of tabloid journalism). For example, a Daily Mail article (2014) on the newly formed Cameron cabinet focused on female MPs' attire and the way they 'cat walked' into their first new cabinet meeting. Similarly, a Brexit meeting between English and Scottish Prime Ministers was headlined as a 'Legxit' or a legs beauty contest (Daily Mail 2017).

The tabloid press has also historically fuelled acrimonious debates about nation and race typically promoting a nationalist agenda with, in some cases jingoistic and overtly xenophobic tones (Bingham & Conboy 2015). The legitimacy of nations has often been predicated on the discursive reproduction of the affective dimension of being part of an 'imagined' community (Anderson 2006) even if in 'banal' forms (Billig 1995). The tabloids' direct interpellation of audiences as part of a national 'textual community' promotes their identification as a group member but it also encourages readers to feel part of an *us-group* versus an antagonistic *other-group* if feelings are mobilised in such a way. For example, while Edwardian era tabloids reproduced narratives of 'Britannia rules the waves', hostility towards strangers subsequently shifted towards different 'foreigners', namely Irish and Jewish immigrants ('Aliens' in *The Daily Express*, 1901) and then the German 'foes' in World War 1 and 2 ('*The Huns*', *Daily Mail*). The '50s and 60's saw the tabloid press amplifying overtly discriminatory discourses against black people (*Daily Express* headlines in this period included '*Would You Let Your Daughter Marry a Black Man?*'; '*800,000 People Who Shouldn't Be Here*' and '*Visitors Who Never Go Home*'). The 1980s and 1990s saw tabloids engaging with different mainstream representations of Britain and its 'enemies'. For example, the *us versus them* military propaganda was recurrent in The Sun's coverage of the Falklands war ('our lads' for the British army) and the Afghanistan war ('Prince Harry...one of our boys') (see Richardson 2009). The last twenty years have seen the tabloids press engaged in a backlash against multiculturalism with distinct Islamophobic and Europhobic tones. In this context most tabloid titles have peddled negative frames of news on immigration, for example, through frequent metaphorical domains that have associated immigrants with natural disaster and animals (*floods* and *swarms of people*) and states with containers ('Open door policy must be changed, Britain is full').

Historically, a large section of the British tabloid press has also strongly opposed the EU's political project and has portrayed UK/EU relationships negatively (Hardt-Mautner 1995). Titles such as *The Sun* have often represented the UK and the EU as opponents relying on metaphors of war (Daddow 2012). In the 1980s *The Sun* encouraged readers to submit 'anti-French jokes' and in 1990 it published the infamous headline 'Up yours Delors' vilifying the then President of the European Commission for his French-centric vision of Europe. Other titles such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express* have often initiated various anti-EU 'crusades' based on bogus 'Euro-myths' (e.g. 'the EU wants to ban our kettles') some of which the EU Commission has debunked through a dedicated website². The mainstream discourse to which a large part of the tabloids' readership has been relentlessly exposed for years has portrayed the UK as a victim of a Franco-German alliance or a Brussels 'conspiracy plot' (see also Levy et. al. 2016).

There have been different explanations for why the tabloid press, and *The Sun* in particular, have taken their specific Eurosceptic (or indeed Europhobic) stance. It is reported that when *The Evening Standard* journalist Anthony Hilton asked Rupert Murdoch the reason why he was so opposed to the European Union he replied: "That's easy. When I go into Downing Street they do what I say; when I go to Brussels they take no notice" (Hilton 2016). There are however further plausible motives for how nationalist sentiment has been mobilised against the EU and why the EU's 'ever closer Union' project has been represented as incompatible with British interests escalating into calls for Brexit. Brexit can be read as a populist response driven by political opportunism leveraging both logics of acceleration/deceleration of globalisation patterns (Zappettini & Krzyżanowski 2019). From a leftist ideological perspective, the argument of global deceleration rejected neoliberalism and austerity (with the EU seen as a key actor of global governance penalising power within national remits) while the right-wing side advocated a logic of global acceleration, that is further liberalisation and international free trade, portraying the EU as frustrating British 'global' mercantile aspirations (cf. Zappettini 2019a, 2019b). The tabloid press capitalised on both views advocating Brexit from the stance of trade frustrated by the EU's red tape as well as from the stance of 'working people' left behind by the EU transnational neoliberal model (see Zappettini 2020). In relation to domestic politics, Brexit was also a discursive opportunity for England to re-imagine itself as a new powerful democracy in the wake of Scottish and Welsh devolution (Barnett 2018) and vis-a-vis its imperial past. In this vein, O' Toole (2018) argues that through the Brexit vote, the English directed their anger to the EU in order to reaffirm their glorious past and recreate a sense of groupness through 'consensual' humiliation that tapped into the national psyche of British exceptionalism (see also Cohen 2019). As evoking emotions of shame and humiliation helps one feel morally superior, by representing the struggle of 'freeing' itself from the EU's yoke, Britain was trying to redeem itself from its imperial legacy in a reversal of the victim-perpetrator roles

² <https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/curved-bananas/> (Accessed: 28.09.2018).

(O’ Toole 2018). O’ Toole also points to a generalised interpretation of Brexit as an act of ‘heroism’ in relation to the narrative that Brexit would help Britain escape the EU’s doomed project (and equally save the EU from itself). Such a cautionary tale was often narrated by Leavers who metaphorically urged voters to embrace Brexit as the only way to abandon the EU’s ‘sinking ship’. The Titanic allegory became a powerful symbolic narrative of Britain saving itself from the catastrophic collision to which the direction of EU politics would lead and crucially to juxtapose Britain’s ‘heroic lifeboat’ vis-a-vis the EU’s hubris (Charteris Black 2019). This nationalist framing of Brexit news was particularly prevalent in the Sun’s titles for example in the front-page headline *‘Beleave in Britain’* (13/6/2016) urging to vote out and in the front-page headline hailing the referendum outcome as *‘Independence Day’* (23/6/2016). Mobilising emotions around Brexit and portraying exiting the EU as the only way for the UK to ‘regain’ its sovereignty and dignity was certainly at the heart of the tabloids discourse during the Brexit referendum campaign. For example, an analysis of how the tabloid press covered the campaign (Zappettini 2021) found that “the vast majority of tabloids relied on discursive strategies that primarily appealed to emotions of fear, resentment and empowerment in an antagonistic framing of the British versus ‘other’ people. [...] The framing of Brexit as an enactment of British pride was prominent and often adopted by a number of articles in relation to strategies that typically appealed to emotions of national resistance and standing up to the *people’s* opponents/bullies”. It is against this background that the analysis has focused on an article published by The Sun on 21 September 2018 titled ‘EU dirty rats’ (see Appendix 1) to show how such pre-legitimising narratives were taken up by tabloids during the period in which Brexit was institutionalised. The article is an opinion piece referring to events that occurred a few days beforehand in Salzburg of which the next section will provide some background.

2.1. A contextualisation of the Salzburg meeting

Following the 2016 referendum result to leave the EU and the trigger of Article 50, the UK and the EU began their negotiations on their future relationship status. In July 2018, the then Prime Minister Theresa May laid out the Government’s plan for such a new UK/EU partnership in what became known as the Chequers proposal after the country estate where it was presented to the Cabinet. The Chequers proposal envisaged the UK sharing a common rulebook for maintaining ‘frictionless’ free trade of goods and services with the EU but made no concessions on freedom of movement and foresaw no role for the European Court of Justice over UK laws. The proposal met with negative responses among EU leaders when it was presented to them at an informal summit in Salzburg in September 2018. French president Macron said the plan was ‘unacceptable’ because the UK was ‘cherry picking’ the most favourable terms without accepting any obligations deriving from such a close association with the Union. He was also keen to signal EU unity in the face of the populist surge across Europe. The European Council

President Donald Tusk said May's plan would not work because it undermined the single market by giving British companies a competitive advantage. In short, the plan was dismissed as another 'global Britain' fantasy of 'having its cake and eating it too' (see Zappettini 2019, Musolff 2021, this issue) while PM May called for the EU to treat the UK with more respect in Brexit negotiations (BBC, 2018). 'Ambush' and 'humiliation' became prevalent terms of framing the above events in British public discourse, not only among politicians but also in news outlets including the quality press (Quinn 2020). The 'humiliation' of Britain in Brexit negotiation was frequently evoked by the media and such representations were widely reproduced in public opinion. In a 2019 poll, 90% of Britons thought that Brexit negotiations had brought shame to the nation (although more people believed the blame lay with the British government's handling of Brexit than the EU's) (Sky News, 2019). Crucially, the Salzburg meeting took place a few weeks before the Conservative party annual conference and the Chequers meeting was meant to represent the PM's attempt to quell hard Brexiteers within her party who would like to leave the EU with no deal while, at the same time, she was trying to compromise on softer Brexit positions including those which would favour a second referendum. The PM hoped that the Chequers plan would be a political opportunity to reconcile her divided party while strengthening her leadership. Part of the negative press coverage therefore had much to do with the PM's domestic credibility and her leadership and in the quality press 'humiliation' primarily referred to the PM's reputation within domestic rather than international politics (although the latter was also relevant for example to make the case for showing how Britain's clout on the world stage had waned³). The tabloid press, however, (as well as right-wing politicians⁴) predominantly tended to frame the meeting outcome in terms of Britain itself being humiliated and the Prime Minister being 'ambushed' i.e. invited to the talks in Salzburg and led to believe that her plan would be agreed on only to be shunned by the EU leaders.

3. Analytical approach

While the analytical approach has adopted a general Critical Discursive orientation (Wodak & Fairclough 1997) it has in particular drawn from Communication Studies the well known concept of *framing* (Entman 1993, see also Solopova & Kushneruk, in this issue). Framing relates to how the news narrative defines events and issues (e.g., as problems, crises, etcetera) and how it links them to actors, causes and any suggested solutions. As Entman (1993: 52) points out, framing involves the selection of specific "aspects of a perceived reality to make

³ See <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/brexit-theresa-may-deal-suez-britain-eu-a8730746.html> (Accessed: 23.09.2018).

⁴ See, for example, Dominic Raab's comment "We've been humiliated as a country" <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/14/brexit-britain-national-humiliation-uk-eu> (Accessed: 14.06.2019).

them more salient in a communicating text”. Through framing, the speaker – in this case the journalist or editorial voice⁵ – is not only able to provide a specific perspective on certain objects of social reality but also to define the conceptual tools for reasoning about those objects and, crucially, to influence the audience’s interpretations and actions in relation to them. A frame can thus be understood in terms of language, images or their multimodal combination deployed to articulate a discourse as well as in terms of reasoning devices, that is the conceptual framework through which the issue is made sense of and evaluated. A frame can therefore provide the ethical ‘toolbox’ and drive moral reasoning on the issue, especially when frames consolidate into socially agreed perspectives that become the dominant interpretation or the conventional schema for the community that consumes and reproduces a particular discourse (Musolff 2016, Charteris Black 2019). In this sense, ideologies can be propagated by the media to their audiences through the ‘cumulative effect’ (Bell 1996) of repeatedly used frames which normalise reality within a larger epistemic community such as a newspaper’s readership. Against this background, the in-depth analysis has zeroed in on linguistic devices through which framing was operated, in particular allegory (Charteris Black 2019), metaphors (Musolff 2016) as well as the discursive strategies (Wodak et al. 2009) through which moral reasoning around Brexit was articulated. Put succinctly, allegories are symbolic narrations aimed at conveying “some form of covert ethical comment that cautions the reader or listener indirectly on how to behave when faced with some form of moral question” (Charteris Black 2019: 18). Allegorical narratives can thus be rhetorically used to frame events and actors around distinct ethical precepts and, crucially, to induce moral reasoning along distinct metaphorical scenarios. Musolff (2016) defines a metaphorical scenario as: “a set of assumptions [...] about the prototypical elements of a concept, [...] ‘dramatic’ story lines and default outcomes, as well as ethical evaluation of these elements, which are connected to the social attitudes and emotional stances that are prevalent in the respective discourse community” (Musolff 2016: 30–31). Discursive strategies, on the other hand, are ‘intentional plan[s] of practices... adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal’ (Wodak et al. 2009: 94) and are predicated on implicit/explicit argumentative schemes. For example, Wodak et al. (2009) refer to the construction of national identity achieved, inter alia, through strategies of unification and differentiation predicated on arguments of comparison (see also Zappettini 2019c for a discussion of discursive strategies aimed at dismantling or delegitimising national identities).

⁵ See Goffman (1981) for a distinction between author, principal and animator and Dobrosklonskaya (2021, this issue) for a discussion of ‘news voices’. In this case the article analysed is anonymous and featured under the ‘The Sun says’ column which is where the newspaper traditionally has published its collectively authored editorial pieces. The Sun says ‘We can’t wait to free ourselves’ reproduces the newspaper’s explicit pro-Brexit agenda.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. Mobilising emotions: us vs. them and the allegory of EU's gangsterism

The discourse in this article is conspicuously driven by the allegory of *gangsterism* and the metaphorical scenario of emancipation. The piece frames the Salzburg meeting as being played out by two opposed actors in a hyperbolic metaphorical scenario of *gangster culture* permeated by violence and abuse. As noted above, allegories have symbolic and rhetorical value and are produced to argue a particular moral stance. In this case, the key purpose of framing the UK/EU relation through the allegory of gangsterism is to characterise Britain as the story hero who after being unjustly 'bullied' it now resists and breaks free from its criminal antagonist via Brexit. The framing of actors relies on antithetical and antagonistic representations of *us* (the in-group) and *them* (the out-group) and of an unbalanced relationship between the two groups with distinct *oppressor/villain* and *oppressed/hero* roles for the EU and Britain, respectively. The out-group is framed as the *oppressor* through different semiotic characterisations. For example, the EU is metonymically caricatured as a 'mobster' pair made up of French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron and the EU's Council President Donald Tusk. In English, the lexeme *mobster* connotes someone who is involved in organized crime or belongs to a criminal gang and the term *mob* has also been used as a synonym for the mafia. Such linguistic characterisation is visually reinforced by the meme of the two politicians dressed as gangsters in pinstripe suits and holding guns and by the war metaphor 'fear [is the EU's] only weapon in their arsenal'. Consistent with the allegorical narration of *gangsterism*, the passage "Brussels has made us an offer it thinks we can't refuse" is a clear intertextual reference to the popular film *The Godfather* (1972) where the sentence 'an offer that can't be refused' is famously uttered by the protagonist, mafia boss Don Corleone played by Marlon Brando, to imply a mafia order. Brussels making Britain an offer it can't refuse is thus euphemistically used here to mean a threatening command that Britain must execute or else it will have to bear the consequences. The gangster culture scenario is reinforced in lines 25–26 where the EU is represented as an 'outfit' (a metonymy for gangsters) that 'looks more at home in Sicily than Strasbourg' the two geographical references conjuring up associations with the mafia and the EU Parliament, respectively. The crime allegory is further evoked by the headline 'EU dirty rats', a homophonic reference to gangster film, *Taxi!* (1932) in which actor James Cagney is believed to utter the iconic line "You dirty rat!"⁶

Further considerations can be made on the *us/them* juxtaposition. While in the article third-person plural pronouns and adjectives (*they/them/their*) are exclusively attributed to the EU or its leaders to portray them as Britain's arrogant bullies ('*they have refused to negotiate in good faith/ to compromise/ insulted the minister/ ignored their citizens*'), the first-person plural pronouns and adjectives (*we/us/our*)

⁶ The exact line is "you dirty yellow-bellied rat" however in popular culture this has often been misquoted as "You dirty rat".

are inferable as relating to the newspaper's own editorial voice and that of its readership ('we join the Prime Minister in saying no', 'our Brexit message', 'The Sun says we can't wait to free ourselves') as well as to the British nation and its institutions ('to punish us', 'Brussels has made us an offer', 'we need to [prepare] for a clean-break Brexit', 'they want us to vote'). As noted in footnote 5 the article is anonymous and, as it is conventional with pieces under 'The Sun says' headline, can be attributed a collective authorship. In a symbiotic relationship between producer and consumer of text The Sun enacts the role of spokesperson for what can be seen as an 'imagined' textual/national community. The alignment between the newspaper and its readership is not only organised along ideological lines but also achieved through colloquial vocabulary resonating with a demotic style (e.g. 'Fat chance of that', 'cackhanded') and through satire (see below).

4.2. Delegitimising the EU through moral reasoning and satire

The main discursive strategies adopted in this article are the *delegitimation of the EU* – which is achieved leveraging on *emotions of fear* and via the allegory of gangsterism discussed above – and the logically consequential *legitimation of Brexit* as 'breaking free' from the oppressor in a heroic act of defiance and emancipation/empowerment. The delegitimation of the EU is operated not only through the argument that the Union is an undemocratic set up but also via the pervasive metaphor of 'THE EU IS A CRIMINAL ORGANISATION' which suggests precisely the 'illegality' of its actions and its intentions just as criminal gangs operate outside the law and are based on a culture of abuse and violence. Moreover, the crime metaphor is deployed to construct the scenario of 'moral fight back' via the argument that the EU have been 'bullying' the UK and thus to legitimise Brexit as Britain breaking free from such 'racket'. This argument ties in with historical discourses of the alleged vexation and victimisation of the UK by Brussels that have been produced and circulated by The Sun well before Brexit and that were amplified during the referendum campaign (see Zappettini 2021). Such logical discursive continuity is reiterated in the passage 'the European Union has shown time and time again why more than 17 million people voted to leave' (lines 18–19) which constitutes the causal link between the portrayal of the EU as Britain's oppressor and Brexit as a popular response to it. We also notice the representation of Brexit as externally validated by other European citizens 'where more and more voters are turning against [the EU]' (lines 24–25). The article also delegitimises Macron and Tusk personas who are associated with the EU as a 'two-bit' (i.e., worthless) mobster. Further negative representations of the two leaders are predicated on ascribing them immoral actions and arrogant characteristics (Donald Tusk 'trolling the PM on Instagram' and Macron's 'puffed up pomposity'). In a satirical vein (which is consistent with The Sun's 'tongue-in-cheek' discursive style) the couple is also delegitimised as 'inept gangsters' via the analogy with Bugsy Malone, a popular musical comedy film about would-be gangsters (itself a parody of real-life gangsters Bugs Moran and Al Capone) and the statement 'This

lot is more Bugsy Malone than Al Capone' (line). Satire – which relies on the use of irony and exaggeration to ridicule public personas, especially politicians – can represent a form of delegitimation and is well established in British/Western cultures (see Ponton 2021, this issue; and Way 2021, this issue). By likening the two leaders to clumsy criminals the article not only delegitimises them but significantly it legitimises Britain's fight back while downplaying emotions of fear and potential negative consequences from the act of liberation that Brexit would constitute. This reasoning is signalled by expressions such as: 'we've got nothing to be scared of' and 'to show the EU [Britain] won't roll over' which mark Britain's heroic role of standing up against the EU's alleged threatening behaviour and the imagery of a 'new future free of [the EU's] cold, dead hands' (line 33) which personifies the EU as a lifeless individual. Portraying the 'humiliation' of the Prime Minister as an undermining of collective pride and national dignity has further moral implications. Rather than an objective reality, the act of humiliating (that is to show someone's inferiority) is intrinsically correlated to one's own perception of one's own status. One country can therefore feel humiliated if its relationship with other countries is perceived as incompatible with its own imagined status on the world stage. In this case representations of humiliation rely on the implicit assumption that Britain carries more power than other EU countries and that that should be reflected in negotiations. Moreover, representations of Prime Minister being ambushed and mortified are predicated on the assumption of some intentional calculated attempts to treat her in such a malevolent way.

5. Conclusions

Approaching journalist discourse at the intersection of affective, stylistic, and political dimensions of communication, this paper has discussed how emotions were mobilised in the Brexit public debate via the example of The Sun's coverage of the alleged UK's 'humiliation' at the Salzburg meeting. It has been argued that the Sun made an instrumental use of emotive language and populist narratives by leveraging feelings of fear, pride, resistance, and freedom to portray Britain as a victim of the EU and to legitimise Brexit along the moral reasoning of 'heroic emancipation from bullying'. The analysis highlighted how the overarching framing of events and actors in this article was predicated on the *us vs them dichotomy* and was narrated via the allegory of *gangsterism* and the *metaphorical scenario of emancipation*. The UK was characterised as the story hero who is morally entitled to break free from its criminal bullying antagonist via Brexit. The framing of the EU and Britain as the *oppressor/ oppressed*, respectively, was semiotically realised through the pervasive multimodal metaphor THE EU IS A CRIMINAL ORGANISATION, that portrays the EU as an illegal racket and its leaders at the same time threatening and inept, and via specific intertextual references tapping into the popular culture of mafia and gangster films. This framing served to dramatize the imagery of Britain held captive by the EU and to represent Brexit as an opportunity to stand up to the enemy and upend the status

quo. In addition, moral reasoning made use of satirical and colloquial registers designed to resonate with the intended audience. The analysis showed how The Sun performed the role of spokesperson for its reading community by tapping into the psychology of *national emotions* (collective feelings of groupness, shared identities and interests). In this sense The Sun's framing of Brexit events and actors has been key in the discursive reproduction as an 'imagined' affective dimension of Britishness. Crucially, representations in this article concatenate into The Sun's long-established portrayal of frustration at the power asymmetry between the UK and the EU and the UK's victimisation by the Brussels and Westminster elites (Zappettini 2019). Eliciting such emotions was instrumental in pushing the newspaper anti-EU agenda and in delegitimising the EU as Britain's oppressor it must free itself/acquire independence. Mobilising emotions of fear and pride was equally instrumental in legitimising and institutionalising 'harder' forms of Brexit (see Zappettini, forthcoming for a discussion of how the narrative of Britain's enemies was framed in the tabloid press during the post-referendum debate).

Emotional language and specific narratives may become common currency in the way we speak about certain actors and in how we understand certain affairs or processes and should invite us to consider the question of tabloid journalism and its role in making the UK press as "the least trusted in Europe" (European Broadcasting Unit 2017). Finally, as with all interpretive studies, the limitation must be acknowledged of analysing emotions in language through the lens of inferences made by the analyser. While the socio-political contextualisation and the literature have provided the background to the interpretation, the question of audience reception remains open and any study addressing emotions in the readership could help corroborate these findings.

© Franco Zappettini, 2021



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

REFERENCES

- Alba-Juez Laura & Tatiana Larina. 2018. Language and Emotion: Discourse-Pragmatic Perspectives. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 22 (1). 9–37.
- Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York, Verso.
- Barnett, Anthony. 2018. *Lure of Greatness*. Penguin Random House.
- Bednarek, Monika & Helen Caple. 2014. Why Do News Values Matter? Towards a New Methodological Framework for Analysing News Discourse in Critical Discourse Analysis and Beyond. *Discourse & Society* 25 (2). 135–58.
- Bell, Alan. 1996. *The language of news media*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bennett, Samuel. 2019. Present tense, future (im)perfect: 'Brexit' as a crisis issue in UK political discourse. *Critical Discourse Studies* 16 (4).

- Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London, Sage Publications.
- Bingham, Adrian & Martin Conboy. 2015. *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the present*. Oxford, Peter Lang.
- Brusenbauch Meislova, Monika. 2019. Brexit Means Brexit—or Does It? The Legacy of Theresa May's Discursive Treatment of Brexit. *The Political Quarterly* 90. 681–689.
- Buckledee, Steve. 2018. *The language of Brexit: How Britain talked its way out of the European Union*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Charteris-Black, Jonathan. 2019. *Metaphors of Brexit: No Cherries on the Cake?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cohen, Nick. 2019. One thing now unites Britons – a sense of national humiliation. Published in *The Guardian* (online). <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/23/one-thing-now-unites-britons-a-sense-of-national-humiliation-brexit> (Accessed: 14.01.2021).
- Conboy, Martin. 2004. Language and the British tabloid press. In J. Aitchison and D. Lewis (eds.) *New Media Language*. Routledge.
- Daddow, Oliver. 2012. The UK media and 'Europe': from permissive consensus to destructive dissent. *International Affairs* 88 (6). 1219–1236.
- Dancygier, Barbara. 2021. Narrativized simile and emotional responses to Brexit. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25 (3). 663–684. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-2021-25-3-663-684>
- Dobrosklonskaya, Tatiana G. 2021. Markers of emotionality in Russian news coverage of the 75-pth anniversary of the WWII Victory. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25 (3). 705–722. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-2021-25-3-705-722>
- Entman, Robert M. 1993. Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43 (4). 51–58.
- Fairclough, Norman & Ruth Wodak. 1997. Critical Discourse Analysis. In T. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction* 2. 258–284. London: Sage.
- Foolen, Ad. 2012. The relevance of emotion for language and linguistics. In Foolen, A.P., Lüdtke, U.M., Racine, T.P., Zlatev, J. *The relevance of emotion for language and linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Goffman, Erving. 1981. *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hameleers, Michael, Linda Bos & Claes H. de Vreese. 2016. “They did it”: The effects of emotionalized blame attribution in populist communication. *Communication Research* 44(6). 870–900
- Hardt-Mautner Gerlinde. 1995. ‘How does One Become a Good European?’: The British Press and European Integration. *Discourse & Society* 6 (2). 177–205.
- Hilton, Anthony. 2016. Anthony Hilton: Stay or go – the lack of solid facts means it’s all a leap of faith. Published in *The Evening Standard* (online). <https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/anthony-hilton-stay-or-go-the-lack-of-solid-facts-means-it-s-all-a-leap-of-faith-a3189151.html> (Accessed: 14./01.2021).
- Karin, Wahl-Jorgensen. 2019. *Emotions, Media and Politics*. London: Polity.
- Koller, Veronika, Kopf, Susanne, & Miglbauer, Marlene. (eds.). 2019. *Discourses of Brexit*. London: Routledge.
- Krämer, Benjamin. 2014. Media Populism: A conceptual clarification and some theses on its effects. *Communication Theory* 24 (1). 42–60.
- Larina, Tatiana, Vladimir Ozyumenko & Douglas Mark Ponton. 2020. Persuasion strategies in media discourse about Russia: Linguistic ambiguity and uncertainty. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 15 (1). 3–22.
- Levy, David A.L., Billur Aslan and Diego Bironzo. 2016. *UK Press Coverage of the EU Referendum*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Maccaferri, Marzia. 2019. Splendid isolation again? Brexit and the role of the press and online media in re-narrating the European discourse. *Critical Discourse Studies* 16 (4).
- Mackenzie, J. Lachlan & Laura Alba-Juez. 2019. *Emotion in discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Martin, James R. & Peter R. R. White. 2005. *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Musolff, Andreas. 2016. *Political Metaphor Analysis: Discourse and Scenarios*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Musolff, Andreas. 2017. Truths, lies and figurative scenarios: Metaphors at the heart of Brexit. *Journal of Language and Politics* 16 (5). 641–657.
- Musolff, Andreas. 2019. Brexit as “having your cake and eating it”: The discourse career of a proverb. In V. Koller, S. Kopf & M. Miglbauer (eds.). *Discourses of Brexit*, 208–221. London and New York: Routledge.
- Musolff, Andreas. 2021. Hyperbole and emotionalization: escalation of pragmatic effects of metaphor and proverb in the Brexit debate. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25 (3). 628–644.
- Niemeier, Susanne & René Dirven. 1997. *The language of emotions conceptualization, expression, and theoretical foundation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- O’Toole, Fintan. 2018. *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*. London: Head of Zeus.
- Ponton, Douglas M. 2020. *Understanding Political Persuasion: Linguistic and Rhetorical Analysis*. Vernon Press.
- Ponton M. Douglas. 2021. “Never in my life have I heard such a load of absolute nonsense. Wtf” Political satire on the handling of the COVID-19 crisis. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25 (3). 767–788.
- Quinn, Ben. 2020. ‘Humiliation’ And ‘Disaster’: How The UK Press Covered May’s Salzburg Ordeal. [online] the Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/21/humiliation-and-disaster-how-uk-press-covered-theresa-may-salzburg-ordeal> (Accessed: 14.01.2021).
- Rawlison, Francis. 2019. *How Press Propaganda Paved the Way to Brexit*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Richardson, John. E. 2009. *Analysing newspapers: An approach from critical discourse analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schaffer, Deborah. 1995. ‘Shocking Secrets Revealed! The Language of Tabloid Headlines’, ETC: A Review of General Semantics 52 (1). 27–46.
- Van Dijk, Teun Adrian. 2013. *News as discourse*. New York: Routledge.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin. 2019. *Emotions, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Way C.S. Lyndon. 2021. Trump, memes and the Alt-right: Emotive and affective criticism and praise. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25 (3). 789–809.
- White Peter. 2020. The putative reader in mass media persuasion – stance, argumentation and ideology. *Discourse & Communication* 14 (4). 404–423.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1999. *Emotions across languages and cultures. Diversity and universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilce, James MacLynn. 2009. *Language and Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zappettini, Franco & Krzyżanowski, Michal. 2019. The critical juncture of Brexit in media & political discourses: From national-populist imaginary to cross-national social and political crisis, *Critical Discourse Studies* 16 (4). 381–388.
- Zappettini, Franco. 2019a. The Brexit referendum: How trade and immigration in the discourses of the official campaigns have legitimised a toxic (inter)national logic. *Critical Discourse Studies* 16 (4). 403–419.

- Zappettini, Franco. 2019b. The official vision for ‘global Britain’: Brexit as rupture and continuity between free trade, liberal internationalism and ‘values’. In V. Koller, S. Kopf, & M. Milgbauer (eds.), *Discourses of Brexit*, 140–154. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Zappettini, Franco. 2019c. *European Identities in Discourse: A Transnational Citizens’ Perspective*. London: Bloomsbury Advances in Critical Discourse Studies.
- Zappettini, Franco. 2021. The tabloidization of the Brexit campaign: Power to the (British) people? *Journal of Language and Politics* 20 (2). 277–303.
- Zappettini, Franco (forthcoming). *Brexit: a Critical Discursive Analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Other sources

- BBC News (2018) Theresa May: EU must respect UK in Brexit talks. Published online 21 September 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45603192> (Accessed: 14.01.2021).
- BBC News Theresa May: EU must respect UK in Brexit talks. Published online 21/9/2018 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-45603192>. (Accessed: 14.02.2019)
- Daily Mail “Now win election, PM tells new girls” 15/7/2014.
- Daily Mail “Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!” 28/3/2017.
- European Broadcasting Unit. 2017. Trust in Media Report. Available at: <https://www.ebu.ch/publications/trust-in-media-2017E> (Accessed: 14.10.2018).
- Sky News (2019) Brexit: 90% say handling of negotiations is ‘national humiliation’ – Sky Data poll. Published 20/3/2019 (online). <https://news.sky.com/story/brexit-90-say-handling-of-negotiations-is-national-humiliation-sky-data-poll-11670995> (Accessed: 13.01.2021).
- Taxi! (1932) [Film]. Roy Del Ruth. dir. USA: Warner Bros.
- The Godfather (1972) directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

Appendix

EU DIRTY RATS; OUR BREXIT MESSAGE TO... Euro mobsters ambush May

The Sun (England)

September 21, 2018 Friday, Edition 1, National Edition

Copyright 2018 NEWS GROUP NEWSPAPERS LTD All Rights Reserved



Section: EDITORIAL; OPINION; LEADING ARTICLES; Pg. 1,10

EU DIRTY RATS

The Sun Says we can't wait to free ourselves of the two-bit mobsters who run the European Union



Body

WE can't wait to shake ourselves free of the two-bit mobsters who run the European Union. EU leaders promised a fair hearing on our future relationship at yesterday's crunch Salzburg summit. Instead, Mrs May was ambushed with a cackhanded attempt to sign us up to Brussels' unacceptable terms there and then.

The PM refused to budge on the UK's red lines, and she's absolutely right to do so. This lot are more Bugsy Malone than Al Capone.

Yesterday the leaders of the undemocratic European Union showed their true colours.

This isn't some grand project, designed to bring the peoples of Europe together in one happy union. It's a protection racket.

But even before the Prime Minister had been the subject of calculated attempts to humiliate her, we saw just how detached from reality Europe's leaders have become.

Maltese and Czech leaders told Britain to hold a second referendum, employing the same tactic that the EU has used in Ireland and Denmark before.

This isn't based on the half-baked "democratic" argument clung to by never-were and past-it grandees at home, such as Andrew Adonis and Lord Heseltine.

They just want us to be given the chance to vote the "right" way.

Fat chance of that. Throughout this process, the European Union has shown time and time again why more than 17 million people voted to leave.

They have refused to negotiate in good faith. They have refused to compromise, even while Britain has worked day-in, day-out to find agreement.

They have insulted the Prime Minister, ignored their own citizens, and are willing to accept a massive economic hit for the sake of flexing their muscles.

Like all good gangsters, they're trying to rule by fear. That's the only weapon in their arsenal on the Continent, where more and more voters are turning against an outfit that increasingly looks more at home in Sicily than Strasbourg.

All they have is the chance to punish us, and prove to the rest of the continent that it isn't worth leaving.

The message they want to send? You won't get away with it.

Well, Mrs May is right to say that we've nothing to be scared of.

Yes, it is without doubt that we need to pick up the pace on preparations for a clean-break Brexit. It is vital we show the European Union, who still seem to think we'll roll over when it really matters, that we are ready for a new future free of their cold, dead hands.

And despite no-marks such as Donald Tusk trolling the PM on Instagram, and the puffed-up pomposity of France's Emmanuel Macron and Ireland's Leo Varadkar, we haven't entirely given up hope that sensible forces within the EU might find their voice in the crucial months to come – and work with the UK, not against it.

The Government should be all ears if Brussels makes us an offer that works for both sides.

But after yesterday's performance, we don't hold out much hope.

Brussels has made us an offer it thinks we can't refuse.

Today we join the Prime Minister in saying no.

Article history:

Received: 20 January 2021

Accepted: 18 June 2021

История статьи:

Дата поступления в редакцию: 20 января 2021

Дата принятия к печати: 18 июня 2021

Bionote:

Franco ZAPPETTINI is a Lecturer and Director of Postgraduate Research in Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool, UK. His research focuses on the textual/discursive analysis of different forms of political and organisational communication including mediated forms of populism, such as tabloid populism and Euroscepticism in the British press. He has published internationally in peer-reviewed journals and book series. His latest publication is the monograph *Brexit: A Critical Discursive Analysis* forthcoming for Palgrave MacMillan.

Contact information:

University of Liverpool

Foundation Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool, L69 7ZX, UK

e-mail: franco.zappettini@liverpool.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-7049-4454

Сведения об авторе:

Франко ЗАППЕТТИНИ имеет степень доктора, преподает в Ливерпульском университете, Великобритания, руководит аспирантскими программами в области коммуникации и СМИ. Его исследования сосредоточены на текстуальном/дискурсивном анализе различных форм политической коммуникации, включая опосредованные формы популизма, такие как таблоидный популизм и евроскептицизм в британской прессе. Он публикует свои исследования в рецензируемых международных журналах и монографиях. Его последняя публикация – монография *Brexit: A Critical Discursive Analysis* (PalgraveMacMillan).

Контактная информация:

University of Liverpool

Foundation Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool, L69 7ZX, UK

e-mail: franco.zappettini@liverpool.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-7049-4454