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'US VS THEM' RHETORIC OF LEAVE NEWSPAPERS IN THE BUILD-UP TO BREXIT REFERENDUM

Applying the critical discourse analysis approach, the article analyses the 'us/good vs them/bad' pro-Brexit campaign in British newspapers during the three months before the EU membership referendum.

Key words: newspaper discourse, critical discourse analysis, Brexit, us vs them rhetoric.

In modern political space, mass media has the upper hand in producing representations of reality and this "irresistible power of the mass media" has a 'mutagenic' impact on politics [18, p. 248]. The mass media played a key role during the Brexit campaign because it was the site where representatives of the two sides attempted to win the battle for public opinion [4, p. 14]. The referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union sheds light on how the media, particularly the newspapers, responded proactively with their extensive coverage, editorials and in-depth discussion of various issues related to benefits or disadvantages of Britain's membership [15], which ultimately led to the decision to end the so-called 'long and fraud marriage' taken June 23, 2016 [13]. The British newspapers have long been accused of accumulating the Eurosceptic sentiment in the British public sphere and dividing the political common sense of the Brits till the moment of triggering the referendum that has constituted the most memorable event the recent British history.

The **topicality** of the research lies in that it dwells on language means that helped to construct the "we – they" opposition used in pro-Brexit newspaper publications in Great Britain. While news outlets may be entrusted to operate with neutrality, Khalid and Catenaccio et al claim that news is not just what people speak about, but what the media themselves speak about [16, 9]. As Daddow notes, newspapers might not be able to tell people what to think, but they can affect what they think about [11]. Since there is no text without an ideology in its core and behind its language, real life occurrences are selected, used and exploited by news outlets for external reasons. Within the field of linguistics, some aspects of the Brexit phenomenon, namely the metaphorical way to represent the outcome of the referendum, has already been analysed by some scholars (see, for example, [2, 12, 13]).

The **objective** of the article lies in analysing the language means used by some pro-Brexit British national tabloids to construct a political public sphere that reflects their own agenda and ideology, namely the newspapers' attempt to influence the minds of the electorate by sharing an anti-elite and nationalistic view and emphasising an ideology of politics of fear

and antagonism towards the political elite, both of European bureaucrats and of domestic advocates of the Remain vote.

The **object** of the research is newspaper pro-Brexit discourse, while the **subject-matter** of the study is language means employed in newspaper publications to make their readership see the “we – they” opposition as the core of the voting. The research will analyse the discourse of five British newspapers (*The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Times*) in promoting and setting a pro-Brexit agenda throughout the 2016 campaign. The **material** collected for the study consists of 42 newspapers articles.

The objective and the subject-matter determine the **method**, namely Critical Discourse Analysis that Van Dijk considers to be “a type of analytical research that primarily studies the way social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context”. The scholar adds that CDA “focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of *power* and *dominance* in society” [25, p. 353]. The main concern of CDA is not necessarily the use of language as such but rather with the way language is used to and hence to expose “*a relationship between the text and its social conditions, ideologies and power relations*” [20, p. 27]. Yet, according to Blakar [7], each language element is a very complicated and sensitive instrument played by a language user. Thus, the perception and understanding created at the recipient depend on how the addresser uses this sensitive tool. The key figures in this area include Fairclough [2000, 2001, 2003], van Dijk [1999, 2001], Gee [1999], van Leeuwen [1995], Wodak [2000, 2001] and Scollon and Scollon [2001].

The **scientific novelty** of the study resides in that it is the first attempt to conduct linguistic analysis of newspaper pro-Brexit discourse in terms of its oppositional representation of the social and political reality.

The **theoretical value** of the research lies in that it develops the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis by applying it to the discourse practices evolving in ever changing, media dominated modern society.

The **practical value** of the article resides in that it specifies the basic concepts chosen in newspaper pro-Brexit discourse to construct an opposition so as to shape the public opinion as well as distinguishes language means that verbalize these concepts.

CDA claims that there is no text without an ideology in its core. News media can be the most notable in this domain because news is a construction of social reality and is not totally deprived from ideological description as news stories cannot be disconnected from their creator’s values, ideologies, political bias, organizational rules, and thus the reporting decision, selection of content and narrative contexts are also determined by the creator’s beliefs. These shared values are enhanced by the producers of news discourse who aim to create a relationship based on the reader’s assimilation of interests, social expectations and tenets [27, p. 19], [8, p.25] where the greatest resonance is achieved when the narrative and the reader exist in the same cultural and linguistic sphere [17]. Hence, certain news values can be selected in order to mould and perpetuate opinion, and to establish norms that remain unchallenged by its readership [3, 23]. This can be noticed through the combinations of news values – the targeting of stories by the media into what can be considered ‘news’ as well as the use of language and linguistic patterns that emerge through their discourse [10]. Thus, CDA must consider how the language is used and how the text is formed by the use of this language in order to produce a construction that fits the wider society and social practices that contextualise the epistemological underpinnings of discourse [14]. The criteria of news cycle,

the process of newsgathering and the actual news text have been always an argumentative sphere for scholars (see, for example, [20; 23; 27]).

Experts claim that the modern political climate has become mediatized to the extent that the domestic political life has been radically shaped by media and the ideological agenda-based language they adopt. The tabloids do not merely serve up an inferior version of journalistic language; they provide their readers with a distinct linguistic compendium with its own, highly influential range of language use [10, p. 15] The language of the tabloids is a clear and commercially astute attempt to appeal to its target audience, by creating an editorial identity that is unmistakably sensational in its output [10, p.159], because it is the tabloids that are the most prolific in using sensationalist, ideologically biased, emotive language which underpins their distinctive use of popular idiom [10, p. 12–13].

The pro-Brexit press discourse is multi-faceted and extends from economic concerns and migration to a broader, nationalistic rhetoric, erosion of national sovereignty and identity. In fact, experts characterise political culture observed during the EU Referendum as ‘toxic’, ‘racist’ referring to it as ‘politics of fear’ and ‘gutter politics’ [2, p. 49]. UK press coverage of the EU Referendum campaign was ‘biased’ towards the ‘Leave according to a study conducted by Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism a month before the EU referendum vote [24]. The study has found, in the weeks leading up to the nationwide vote, that 45% of national newspaper articles were pro-Brexit in the two months after 20 February, while 27% were in favour of remaining in the EU. That is almost 2:1 against. The Daily Mail was found to be the biggest support of the Leave campaign, followed by *Daily Express*, *Daily Star*, *The Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* [24]. Another study by the University of Loughborough examined 1,127 news stories published by ten daily papers since the start of May 2016, and looked at the tone of coverage of the EU Referendum in the papers and claimed that, weighted by circulation, Leave has an 82% to 18% advantage over Remain [19].

The Brexit-backing British newspapers develop heavily their political agendas against the European institutions. News International, with willing support from ideological Eurosceptics across the top-selling UK tabloid and broadsheets, has proved effective at keeping the British public in a permanent state of ‘war’ with the EU since the 1980s” [11]. Daddow claims that, even prior to the 2016 EU Referendum, the rhetoric of the British press emphasised ‘destructive dissent’ based on perceived ‘threats to British sovereignty and identity’ originating from a German-run continent and had been always giving “a solid diet of anti-EU reporting centering on an undemocratic ‘Brussels’ machine subverting Britain’s governing institutions, British liberty and its way of life” [5, p. 12]. Daddow insists that the Daily Telegraph, the Daily Mail and the Sun have long been antithetical to British membership in the European project. The Express, moreover, was the first newspaper to launch the ‘Get Britain Out’ campaign as long ago as November 2010 [12, p. 50]. What supports his claims is that three days into the campaign, the *Express* ran an article claiming that “Brits are as sceptical as we’ve ever been” [29].

Addressing their readers, the Brexit-backing newspapers used a sensationalized language with powerful and persuasive cogency and, as a result, succeeded in influencing their minds. Representing a newspaper’s collective opinion, newspapers intervened in the debate through declarations of editorial positions with the strategic aim of influencing politicians, campaigners and readers [21, p. 52]. Their articles and editorial pages were so much effective that some became slogans for Leavers, e.g. “*We want our country back*”, “*Retaking control of the country*”, “*Independence Day*” and “*Control our borders*”. These slogans, positive at their face value, have negative implications of people’s lost control over

the country and its future and are full of antagonism to the EU and domestic elites ‘*that won’t let “Us” have our own destiny*’

It should be noted that since the very beginning of the Brexit discourse the Leave newspapers started to spread over and enhance the sense of nationalism as a leading figurehead language through their rhetoric. As Anderson [1] argues, the British newspaper forum has long been one where the press continuously nurtures discussions of national identity. The Express, for example, created a campaign logo from their English Knight masthead to announce the paper’s crusade to ‘*get us out of the EU*’ announcing ‘*We demand our country back*’. The Daily Mail and The Sun published more than one Leave editorial giving them the highest possible prominence by featuring them on the front page. They were joined by the Telegraph and Express in using their front pages to plead with readers to vote Leave on the polling day [21, p. 52].

According to Billig [6], this tabloid approach manifests a distinct sense of nationalism, which explicitly seeks to place a national community by continuously reinforcing national identity, and by placing stories within the context of popular culture. Experts point out that The Express successfully mainstreamed hostile Euroscepticism under terms of nationalism and erosion of sovereignty to Brussels [22]. For example, in one of the editorials, this tabloid proudly refers to Britain as ‘*a great country*’ and to the nation’s historical achievements as ‘*the inventor of Parliamentary democracy, the pioneer of the Industrial Revolution and the victor in two world wars*’. It ends by highlighting the binary distinctions of what is at stake with the referendum vote, contrasting the consequence of Remain as ‘*the end of a thousand years of history*’ with ‘*an exciting new chapter in our island story*’ that will be written if Leave succeeds:

Britain is a great country, the fifth largest economy in the world, the inventor of Parliamentary democracy, the pioneer of the Industrial Revolution and the victor in two world wars... Remain will spell the end of a thousand years of history ...But if we vote to leave, an exciting new chapter in our island story will be written [34].

The Daily Mail uses nationalistic rhetoric to urge the Brits to get their glorious history back by featuring a direct interactive question which implies the persuasive ‘YES’ answer:

They know Britain was a proud, independent trading nation for centuries before the EU was ever thought of. Is it really impossible that we could be one again? [30].

The newspaper discourse demonstrates a prominence in the use of personal pronouns to present themselves as speaking for the common citizen as the Daily Mail tells its readers:

If we vote to leave on June 23, we can take back control of the money we give to Brussels, and we can take back control of who comes to our country... Leaving the EU would allow us to spend more on health and education, and better protect the most vulnerable in our society... It would empower us to rescue the most vulnerable across the globe, liberate us to forge new alliances and trade deals, strengthen us to stand up more vigorously for the rule of law and human rights worldwide, and re-invigorate our democratic institutions [30].

It continues with an interactive tone with the audience directly by asking:

Why on earth should we now want to belong to a dysfunctional club that denies us these rights... This is our one chance. We must seize it [30].

The same holds for The Daily Telegraph which builds a sense of belonging when repeatedly using *we* in sentences with positive hope:

But we will control our own borders; we will let in who we want to come and contribute to our economy [32].

The Sun feeds the collective memory of its readers with nationalistic fervor emphasizing the repetitive pronouns ‘*we*’ and ‘*us*’ as well as opposing the nation to the

‘other’ whom ‘we will get our country back’ from to make Britain ‘even greater’ by recapturing ‘our own powerful nation and values we used to be proud of’:

Our country has a glorious history. This is our chance to make Britain even greater, to recapture our democracy, to preserve the values and culture we are rightly proud of...Vote Leave, and we will reassert our sovereignty — embracing a future as a self-governing, powerful nation envied by all [33].

Michael Billig discusses the rhetoric of the first-person plural ‘we’, and how it is widely used to integrate and unite all of those the author claims to speak for [6, p. 166]. He argues that the use of ‘we’ in a democratising context can have the effect of protecting democracies and their institutions of nationhood, and with that, national identity and the national community [6, p. 168].

Though the content of editorials is important, yet it is headlines that are the primary tool of choice for tabloid newspapers in populising an issue through their rhetoric [10, p. 161]. Thus the tabloids effectively use sensational, and easy-to-memorize headlines to set the tune and to imbue the context with nationalistic fervour. The Sun, for example, publishes on its front page a very clear, simple headline with a powerful message that contains the pun (*believe in Britain – beLEAVE in Britain*) which is eye-catching and unambiguous due to the capitalized LEAVE part:

We urge our readers to beLEAVE in Britain and vote to quit the EU on June 23th June [33].

The Daily Express uses its front-page to make one final populist plea to the British public, which creates a ‘state-of-defence’ atmosphere and turns a voter into a warrior urged to fight for the besieged country:

YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU – VOTE LEAVE TODAY [34].

Constructing the representation of Great Britain as ‘besieged/occupied’ country, the tabloids weave the ‘*Us vs Them*’ narrative emphasizing the gap between *politicians/elites/experts* (i.e. ‘them’) and the electorate (i.e. ‘us’) enhanced by a nationalistic fervor of ‘*British positive-representation*’ against ‘*negative European-representation*’. Here we use Van Dijk’s conceptual work on referential strategies that distinguishes between the ‘positive self-presentation’ and the ‘negative-other presentation’, with the two interacting by foregrounding the positive actions of the ‘insider’ whilst backgrounding the positive actions of the ‘outsider’. The very opposite occurs when discourse is used to emphasise the negative actions of the ‘outsider’ [20, p. 51]. Language in its ideological sphere on the one hand is a “shield” exploited by those who are in power for “legitimization of self”, that is to “de-emphasize negative things about self and to deemphasize positive things about other”, and, on the other hand, it is a “weapon” for “delegitimization” of the other’s power [26].

Political rhetoric almost always includes a tendency to demonize the other and those who are not included in ‘us’ belong to another group, namely ‘them’. It is a classic example of Othering, where one distances oneself together with the people included in ‘us’ from the other(s) referred to. This polarization may be expressed as ‘*good vs bad*’ rhetoric.

Since the anti-establishment view (both domestic and European) which arguably played into the Leave campaign’s hands, the Leave papers overflowed their discourse with the ‘*Us vs Them*’ rhetoric so that the reader could always come through the ‘*Elites and Experts vs. The People*’ discourse as well as frames like ‘*greedy globalised elites of the corporate establishment*’ and ‘*dysfunctional club*’ whose ‘*diktats*’ and ‘*faceless bureaucrats*’ are ‘*destroying livelihoods*’ of people, ‘*making communities fear for their traditional ways of life*’, ‘*depressing wages, putting immense strain on housing and public services*’ and ‘*undermining*

our security against criminals and terrorists’. The Sun, for example, Britain's most-read print newspaper, came out for Brexit in mid-June, arguing:

THIS is our last chance to remove ourselves from the undemocratic Brussels machine ... and it's time to take it... We must set ourselves free from dictatorial Brussels. Throughout our 43-year membership of the European Union it has proved increasingly greedy, wasteful, bullying and breathtakingly incompetent in a crisis... The Remain campaign, made up of the corporate establishment, arrogant Europhiles and foreign banks, have set out to terrify us all about life outside the EU [33].

This passage contains numerous first person pronouns (*we, us, our*) that enhance the feeling of solidarity and common cause among ordinary people, clearly setting them apart from their enemy – *impersonal dictatorial Brussels machine, greedy and incompetent*, supported by corporations and banks. The passage is distinctly dramatic: people have the *last chance* to break free though they are being *terrified* by the EU.

A similar pattern of discourse is displayed by The Express on June 23 that projects its hyperbolic, anti-elite rhetoric onto the domestic elite of Eurocrats and onto the European ‘*organisation that mixes rampant megalomania with epic incompetence*’, and ‘*an unaccountable, self-serving oligarchy that ruthlessly ignores or crushes the popular will in its drive to achieve political unification*’. The newspaper contrasts the ‘*popular will*’ with self-serving and undemocratic Eurocrats who ‘*will act like a conqueror towards a defeated people*’ if the message of the Express and others is ignored [34].

The Sun states the EU as an enemy who is a ‘*monster*’ sweeping over ‘*our democracy*’. The paper describes the Brits as besieged victims by ‘*the stranglehold of the EU superstate*’ who are being ‘*progressively tied up*’, ‘*locked in*’ and ‘*abused*’:

Free from the stranglehold of the EU superstate which, from its modest beginnings 60 years ago, has grown into a monster engulfing our democracy. For 20 years they would not let us join. Now, with us in, they have progressively tied us up in millions of new regulations. And we have our leaders panicking to keep us locked in, using personal abuse and dangerous rhetoric. Leaving will also allow us to free up our net contribution to the EU — a staggering £250million a week — to spend wherever it is most needed. Outside the EU we can re-establish the sovereignty of our elected parliament and our courts [28].

The passage above contains numerous first person pronouns and is built on the opposition ‘*we vs they*’: we are democracy, elected parliament and courts whereas they are stranglehold of the superstate and a monster. The vocabulary used to describe the relationship between Great Britain and the EU resembles discourse of penitentiary institutions (*free, tied up, keep locked, personal abuse, dangerous rhetoric*), where all the hostile actions attributed to the jailer, i.e. EU. Another prominent feature is manipulating with precise figures and a hyperbole: Great Britain’s contribution is neatly named and emphatically characterized (*a staggering £250million a week*), whereas the burden of EU laws is verbalized as *millions of new regulations*.

The Mail’s primary opinion piece advocating Leave bears many similarities to The Sun, in that it pleads with its readers to share its opinion (if they ‘*believe in Britain*’, of course) and is full of antagonistic rhetoric targeted directly at domestic and European elites: *If you believe in Britain, vote leave* [30]. The tabloid lambasts the ‘*lies*’ and ‘*greedy elites*’ of ‘*broken, dying Europe*’ on its front page. On the next day, June 22, the newspaper restarts accusing the EU itself of being ‘*built on lies – starting with the blatant untruth*’ and criticises the EU power ‘*only matched by its incompetence, corruption and hunger to impose ever more statist regulations on 28 utterly diverse member nations*’ adding a harsher description of the ‘*globalised elites*’ of ‘*unscrupulous banks*’, ‘*egregious Euro-supporting George Soros*’,

'arrogant German intransigence' and so on. It is these elites who, the Mail suggests, have 'enraged working class communities in Britain who, more than anyone, have had to cope with mass migration and have every right to feel abandoned' [30].

The Daily Mail was equally upbeat when the "Leave" vote won over "Remain" by four percentage points. 'Take a bow, Britain!' the paper's front page declared on June 24, observing that the 'quiet people of Britain' had conquered an 'arrogant, out-of-touch political class, and a contemptuous Brussels elite' [30].

Thus, the language means utilized by the pro-Leave British newspapers create a social representation that emphasizes the positive presentation of the ordinary British as opposed to the negative presentation of the EU and global and national elites.

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ОППОЗИЦИЯ «МЫ – ОНИ» В БРИТАНСКИХ ПРО-БРЕКЗИТОВСКИХ ГАЗЕТАХ НАКАНУНЕ РЕФЕРЕНДУМА 2016 ГОДА

С помощью критического дискурс-анализа в статье изучается оппозиция «мы/хорошие vs они/плохие» в про-брекзитовской кампании, развернутой британскими газетами за три месяца до референдума о членстве Великобритании в ЕС.

Ключевые слова: газетный дискурс, критический дискурс-анализ, Брекзит, оппозиция «мы - они».

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ОПОЗИЦІЯ «МИ – ВОНИ» В БРИТАНСЬКИХ ПРО-БРЕКЗИТІВСЬКИХ ГАЗЕТАХ НАПЕРЕДОДНІ РЕФЕРЕНДУМУ 2016 РОКУ

В інформаційному просторі сучасного західного суспільства мас медіа виконують провідну функцію у формуванні суспільної думки та державної політики. Дослідження шляхів отримання влади за допомогою використання мовних засобів є метою критичного дискурс-аналізу. Саме цей метод використовується у статті для аналізу текстів британських ЗМІ, які грали ключову роль під час кампанії впливу на виборців, що проводилася прихильниками й опонентами виходу Великобританії зі складу Європейського Союзу в 2016 році і завершилася перемогою тих, хто пропагував так званий Брекзит. Матеріалом дослідження стали 42 статті на підтримку Брекзиту, виданих протягом 2016 року у п'яти найпопулярніших британських газетах.

Аналіз газетних текстів виявив, що одним з основних прийомів, до яких вдавалися журналісти, належить прийом створення опозиції «ми – вони». Автори статей послідовно представляли суперечки навколо членства Великої Британії у Європейському Союзі як конфлікт інтересів простих британців (носіїв «британськості», національних цінностей та національної ідентичності) з інтересами глобальних та національних еліт. Назви таких статей перетворювалися у слогани з закликком повернути собі контроль над країною (напр., *We want our country back*), а у текстах таких статей зафіксовано багаторазове вживання особових та присвійних займенників першої особи множини *we* та *our* в контексті згадування славетної історії Британії та її

визначного внеску в світову науку та культуру. Національна єдність протиставляється спробам домінування жадібного та некомпетентного європейського монстра, бюрократичної машини, яка грає на боці корпорацій та закордонних банків. Мовні одиниці у текстах статей належать до емоційної лексики з негативними конотаціями (*dysfunctional club, dictatorial, wasteful, bullying, terrify*), завдяки чому у читачів створюється відчуття загрози та безпосередній участі у конфлікті, що найяскравіше проявляється у заклику газети *Your country needs you – vote LEAVE today*.

Ключові слова: дискурс, критичний дискурс-аналіз, Брекзит, опозиція «ми – вони».