

Brexit: Before and After. A Corpus-assisted Study of the Referendum Campaigns and the Immediate Aftermath

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Abstract

In this work, we look at how attitudes to the 2016 Brexit Referendum were represented in a number of UK national newspapers, some of which were broadly pro-Brexit, others anti-Brexit, in the three-month period immediately before the vote and in a similar stretch of time after. Given the large scale of data, the examination availed itself of corpus linguistics and corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) methodologies. The principal impression arising from the data before the vote was that to divide attitudes into “for” and “against” Brexit was far too simplistic. There were many shades of opinion between the two extremes. However, the nature of a referendum presents voters with a binary choice. As regards the comments of various agents after the vote, we uncovered some rather surprising reactions by both the “winners” and the “losers”.

1. Introduction

The term corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) was first coined in Partington (2004) to describe the kind of study that results from the combination of corpus linguistics with discourse analysis. It develops from the pioneering work in particular of Mautner (1995) and Stubbs (1996; 2001). The aim of the CADS approach is “the uncovering, in the discourse type under study, of what we might call *non-obvious meaning*, that is, meaning which might not be readily available to naked-eye perusal” (Partington, Duguid, Taylor 2013: 11). In other words, the use of corpus techniques can reveal patterns and meanings which would not emerge using a traditional discourse analysis. To do so, CADS integrates the so-called *quantitative* approach of corpus linguistics, that is, large quantities of texts and statistical analysis of the discourse in question, with the more *qualitative* approach typical of discourse analysis, which examines

selected stretches of discourse in detail. The CADS methodology provides the means to carry out the inductive analysis of a particular data-set, identifying models bottom up from data rather than starting from an imposed hypothesis. At the most general level:

[...] corpus technology helps find other examples of a phenomenon one has already noted. At the other extreme, it reveals patterns of use previously unthought of. In between, it can reinforce, refute or revise a researcher's intuition and show them why and how much their suspicions were grounded (Partington 2003: 12).

This is not the first study of EU attitudes to use corpora. Mautner (1995) examines certain key items (e.g. *the people*, question marks) and mentions of prominent EU officials in, as here, two UK tabloids and two broadsheets. Teubert (2001) investigated the discourse of UK EU-sceptics by downloading a corpus of texts from their websites. Bayley and Williams (2012) is a collection of corpus-assisted studies on European identity using corpora of newspapers and TV news transcripts. Newspapers were also chosen for this study since they are the most widely read texts on political topics and the existence of numerous searchable internet archives helps the collection of data already in electronic form. Furthermore, newspaper data is clearly a very useful area for analysing where discourses are produced and reproduced. As Fairclough (1989: 54) observed:

The hidden power of media discourses and the capacity of [...] power-holders to exercise this power depend on systematic tendencies in news reporting and other media activities. A single text on its own is quite insignificant: the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader and so forth.

2. Methodology: The Brexit News Corpus and the tools to analyse it

The newspaper texts (referred to as the Brexit News Corpus) were collected using the online searchable archive Lexis Nexis, which contains repositories of articles from a large range of British newspapers. The articles were collected from four daily British newspapers: the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* (with its Sunday

equivalent the *Mail on Sunday*), the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* (with the *Sunday Mirror*). We chose two right-leaning and largely pro-Leave newspapers (a broadsheet and a tabloid) and two left-leaning and largely pro-Remain ones (again, a broadsheet and a tabloid) in order to encompass a cross-section of UK news reporting, with newspapers of opposing political stances and of tabloid and broadsheet reporting styles.

The first author downloaded all the articles which contained in the headline the words: Brexit OR EU Referendum.

The purpose was that of selecting only those articles which had the EU referendum as their main topic and did not only happen to just mention it in passing in the article body. In order to allow a diachronic analysis of the news, we divided the corpus in two sub-corpora. The first includes the articles written in the three months before the referendum (22 March 2016 – 22 June 2016), while in the second are the articles written in the three months after the vote (24 June 2016 – 24 September 2016). Using these parameters, 3,290 articles were included in the corpus. In total the corpus amounted to about 2.5 million words (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Composition of the Brexit News Corpus

Newspaper titles	Number of articles		Number of words (approximate)	
	Pre-Brexit	Post-Brexit	Pre-Brexit	Post-Brexit
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	281	492	169,000	316,500
<i>The Guardian</i>	896	1003	810,000	866,500
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	109	159	74,000	103,000
<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	116	234	116,000	87,000
TOTAL	1402	1888	1,169,000	1,373,000

The corpus examination included the use of *WordSmith Tools* suite, version 5 (Scott 2008). The most important computational tools it provides include:

1. The Concordance tool. This extracts all the occurrences of a particular search-word in the corpus and arranges them in a

concordance, that is, a list of lines of texts with the search-word located in the middle of each line. The rest of the line contains the co-text, a few words on the left and right of the search-word. Concordances are generally used to discover patterns of lexical co-occurrence, namely a particular combination of words in a language that happens more frequently than it would by chance. To facilitate the highlighting of language patterns, most concordancers give the researcher the option to sort the list of concordances in various ways. For instance, the list could be sorted alphabetically one or more places to the left or right of the search term. *WordSmith* allows multiple sorts to be carried out at the same time (Baker 2006: 71-93).

2. The WordList tool. This simply provides a list of all the words in a corpus in order of frequency and along with the percentage contribution that each word makes towards the corpus (Baker 2006: 47-69). The WordList tool gives an indication of the absolute frequency of words in a corpus (Partington, Duguid, Taylor 2013: 18). Investigating the reasons why a particular word appears so often in a corpus can help to reveal the presence of discourses.

3. The KeyWords tool. This compares the word-list of one corpus (the corpus subject of the analysis) against the word-list of another corpus (the reference corpus) in order to determine the relative frequency of words, that is, which words occur statistically more often in word-list A compared with word-list B and vice versa (Baker 2006: 121-49).

3. Findings

In this section we firstly discuss the media coverage in the lead-up to the referendum. In the pre-Brexit corpus, three main themes were indicated by the frequency, in the various newspaper word lists, of lexical items pertaining to them. The first is concerned with the pre-vote representation of the referendum. The second deals with a salient aspect of the referendum campaign, namely, the widespread so-called “scaremongering” of which both camps were accused. The third illustrates how the theme of immigration was dealt with by the press.

Secondly, in the post-Brexit corpus, we look at the reactions to the result across the media in general and then, more in detail, in the pro-Leave and pro-Remain newspapers.

3.1. The representation of the referendum

The pre-Brexit corpus contained 3105 occurrences of the word *referendum*. It was part of the construction *pre-referendum* in 22 cases, of *post-referendum* in 21 and of *referendum-related* in 14. Using *WordSmith's* Concord Tool, a concordance was prepared of the search term in the sub-corpus.

We made note of the adjectives that were used to describe the event. Some of them did not betray the political stance of the writer – or of the person quoted – but only acknowledged that the referendum was happening soon (*forthcoming*) or that it was objectively an event of crucial importance (*historic, landmark*). However, the majority of the adjectives expressed a quite strong evaluation, either positive or negative.

Among the adjectives with a positive connotation is *long-delayed*. It was used in an article written by Boris Johnson in the *Telegraph* in which the former mayor of London imagined how historians would describe the event a few decades from now:

So when the British had their **long-delayed referendum**, in June 2016, they were being offered the worst of both worlds. (*Telegraph* 23/05/16)

similar to *long-delayed* is *long-awaited*:

... and back in Britain for the **long-awaited referendum** on June 23. (*Telegraph* 28/05/16)

Both these adjectives describe something positive and needed, something hoped for or expected for a long time. Surprisingly, these were the only two adjectives in the corpus expressing a totally positive evaluation of the referendum. All the others had a more or less explicit negative connotation.

The pro-Remain *Guardian* in particular used a broad range of negative adjectives: from the more moderate *critical* and *divisive* to the highly accusatory *intemperate, reckless, rancorous, accursed, wretched* and even *damn*. Here some of the most explanatory sentences:

Cameron is to blame for unleashing this **reckless referendum**, but above all for the anger seething underneath it. (*Guardian* 20/06/16)

There was football on the other side, bottles of wine beckoning from fridges, and this **damn referendum** already feels like it's gone on for ever. (*Guardian* 03/06/16)

The use of the adjective *looming* is interesting:

Fears over the **looming European Union referendum** may have put the brakes on the UK jobs recovery, official figures are expected to show this week. (*Mail on Sunday* 17/04/16)

The Bank of England has not seen any signs that UK companies are scaling back their investment plans because of uncertainty caused by the **looming EU referendum**, a top Bank official said. (*Guardian* 05/05/16)

While the OED simply defines the verb *to loom* as “coming indistinctly into view”, further examples from newspaper articles suggest that something that *looms* is often something threatening:

But the barriers to tourism are daunting: dozens of heavily-armed militias, a desperately weak central government, jihadi terrorism and, some warn, the **looming threat** of state failure. (*Guardian* 7/11/13)

Management has forecast there will be a **looming shortage** of about 115,000 homes in London over the next five years (*Daily Mail* 14/08/13)

with a **looming financial crisis** and grave security issues, President Buhari's inheritance is daunting. (*Guardian* 1/04/15)

Though seemingly neutral, the item *looming*, in newspaper prose at least, has a negative semantic (or evaluative) prosody (Louw 2003; Stewart 2010) and so its use in association with the referendum betrays the writer's negative attitude to it.

3.2. The theme of fear

A considerable number of items in the word-frequency lists pertained to the emotion of fear, and so a concordance was prepared of the search term *fear**. The asterisk is a so-called “wild-card” which allows a search for all items beginning with the specified string. In this case, the search-engine found *fear*, *feared*, *fearful*, *fearing*, *fearless*, *fears*, *fearsome* as well as *fear-mongering* and *fearmongering*.

The most frequent co-occurring items were, unsurprisingly,

grammatical words such as *of*, *to*, *that*, *about*. Beyond that, the other words could be attributed to one of the following categories:

1. the referendum (*Brexit*, *vote*, *leaving*, ...)
2. the campaigns (*Leave*, *Remain*, *Project Fear*, *tactics*, ...)
3. the economy (*Business*, *economic slowdown/growth*, *market*, *investments*, *sterling*, ...)
4. immigration (*immigration*, *fear of the other*, ...)
5. the people involved (*voters*, *British*, *government*, *Osborne*, ...)
6. areas involved (*UK*, *Britain*, *Ireland*, *global*, ...)

What emerges from this first categorisation of the terms most often found in close proximity to discourses of *fear*, is that fear characterised both sides. The Remain side mainly tried to scare voters by emphasising the economic damage that Brexit would cause. The Leave side played on the fear of the working and lower middle classes in the UK of immigrants (the *other*). The resort to accusations of *fearmongering* or, more commonly, *scaremongering* on both sides was well documented in the press coverage, even though only the Remain campaign was labelled ‘Project Fear’ by its opponents. As a next step, then, we concordanced *scaremonger*^{*} and the hyphenated form *scare-monger*^{*}; the results are reported in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Occurrences of *scaremonger*^{*}/*scare-monger*^{*}

	<i>scaremonger</i> [*]	<i>scare-monger</i> [*]
The <i>Mirror</i>	10	2
The <i>Daily Mail</i>	21	1
The <i>Guardian</i>	64	—
The <i>Telegraph</i>	35	—

Scanning through the lines individually, it became clear that *scaremonger* was rarely used as a noun to describe a person who deliberately spreads alarming reports. The only two cases were:

He accused Mr Johnson of being a “**scaremonger** on wages”. (*Daily Telegraph* 15/06/16)

If I warn you not to jump into the lions' enclosure at the zoo because the lions might eat you, you would be ill-advised to yell "**Scaremonger!**" as you scramble joyfully over the fence. (*Guardian* 10/06/16)

The verb *scaremonger* was not common either. The majority of the concordance lines contained the form *scaremongering*, both as a noun – namely the practice of spreading alarming reports – and as an adjective, collocating with *campaign* and *tactics*.

The occurrence of pre-modification indicated various types of 'scaremongering'. While the Brexit camp's scaremongering was once defined as *desperate* by the opponents, the adjectives describing the actions of the Remain camp gave a more complete idea of how their arguments were perceived: Stronger In's scaremongering is constructed as continuous (with collocates like *constant* and *incessant*), but also as unreasonable bordering on crazed (*baseless*, *demented*, *ludicrous*). In addition, it is perceived as deliberately shocking (*blatant*, *cynical*, *naked*, *outrageous*), implying that some Remainers at least were telling the British people downright lies.

Looking at the agency and the actors, who accuses whom of scaremongering? A closer analysis of the concordances and of the co-text revealed that, in the pro-Leave press (*Mail* and *Telegraph*), the action of scaremongering was in almost every case attributed to the Stronger In campaign. The majority of the accusations were directed towards the Prime Minister David Cameron, prominent ministers such as George Osborne or the Chancellor Philip Hammond, the Government generally, the metonymic "Downing Street" or, more comprehensively, simply the "Establishment".

They are mainly accused of spreading alarmist stories on Britain's economy after Brexit. Even when Stronger In claims are backed by experts, they are nevertheless dismissed as false and scaremongering, in the following case with a touch of sarcasm:

GEORGE Osborne was accused of '**outrageous** **scaremongering**' last night after suggesting pensioners would lose up to £32,000 each if Britain votes for Brexit. [...] The Prime Minister and Chancellor have, in recent months, claimed Brexit could lead to war, genocide, recession, migrant camps in Kent, 800,000 job losses, house price collapse, stratospheric rises in clothing and food prices and the end of cheap holidays. [...] Former

work and pensions secretary Iain Duncan Smith dismissed the warnings as **a cynical scare story**, saying there was no evidence Brexit would drive up inflation or spark a collapse in asset prices. (*Daily Mail* 27/05/16)

Unsurprisingly, in the pro-Remain press there were some instances of the term used also to charge the Leave supporters. In the majority of these cases, the allegation is that of spreading false myths about immigration (see below):

The threats coming from the Brexiteers about Turkey joining the EU and millions of Turks coming here are **scaremongering** in the extreme (*Daily Mirror* 7/06/16)

Dave Prentis, the head of public sector union Unison, reported the [Breaking Point, anti-immigration] poster to police, saying: 'This is **scaremongering** in its most extreme form.' (*Daily Mirror* 20/06/16)

We then also searched for **monger** to examine other possible uses of the suffix-monger/-mongering in addition to *fearmonger* and *scaremonger*. The other term found was *doom-monger/doom-mongering*. The adjective *doom-mongering* always pre-modified *predictions* being made – according to Brexiters – by Remainers exaggerating the risks of Brexit:

In recent days a string of Cabinet ministers have been wheeled out to make **doom-mongering predictions** about the risks of Brexit. (*Daily Mail*, 29/03/16)

The warning is the latest in a series of **doom-mongering predictions** from pro-EU ministers. (*Daily Mail*, 27/05/16)

Overall, it seems clear that both camps used fear to make their case, but, as noted earlier, only the Stronger In campaign was branded “Project Fear”, which could imply the latter’s rhetorical strategy was less effective.

3.3. Discourses on immigration

Finally, we looked at how the theme of immigration was dealt with in the pro-Leave and pro-Remain press by examining the articles in the pre-vote corpus containing the search word *immigration*. It was very often explicitly framed as one of the key themes of the

EU referendum debate, especially with reference to the Leave campaign. The majority of the discourses focused on the need to *control* immigration since immigration is a *problem*, something that was causing *worries*, *anxieties* and even *fears* to the British people.

However, many articles noticed that the pros and cons of immigration were difficult to spot amid the confusing mix of *promises*, *lies*, *nonsense* fuelling the debate. The Government was even accused of “hiding the truth about immigration” (*Daily Mirror* 03/04/16).

The concordance lines and more detailed study of the cotext revealed a wide range of different types of representation. For example, there is a distinction between different types of immigrants based on their country of origin. At the most general level, immigrants are divided into *EU* or *non-EU*, but more specific distinctions are also present:

But pulling up the drawbridge against the rest of Europe is the wrong answer. The right answer is the same one we used when **migrants from Ireland** were vilified in the last century; when **Jewish immigrants** were targeted a century ago; and when **Asian and African-Caribbean** workers were attacked in the 1950s, 60s and beyond. That is, strong trade unions delivering the rate for the job, whoever you are and wherever you come from. (*Guardian* 21/06/16)

Columnist Trevor Kavanagh took up the immigration point: “The prospect that scares the pants off voters is mass **Muslim immigration**, now running at well over a million each year into Europe **from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Africa and the Arab world**.” (*Guardian* 18/04/16)

Furthermore, immigrants are divided into categories also depending on their working skills – *professional*, *skilled*, *un-skilled* or *jobless*. *Illegal* immigrants are often mentioned, too.

However, what emerges as a widespread theme, especially in the Remain press, is anti-immigration. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the concordances for the term anti-immigration in the pro-Remain press.

The adjectives *racist*, *inflammatory*, *aggressive* are used to describe the kind of rhetoric allegedly being used by Brexiters. Vote Leave representatives – Farage, Gove, Johnson, (lines 1, 7) – are accused of spreading anti-immigrant sentiments. In line 20, Cameron as well is accused of fuelling anti-immigration feeling

by the *Guardian*. The article refers to when, on the eve of the 2015 general election, Cameron warned that a Labour government would mean a “return to uncontrolled immigration” and that immigration had to be massively reduced (Chapman 2015). We need to look at the whole newspaper paragraph to see exactly what Cameron is accused of:

For politicians to promise policies they cannot deliver disastrously undermines faith in the democratic system. That lack of trust is fuelling the leave campaign. But Cameron’s pledge also fuelled **anti-immigration sentiment**. He framed mass immigration as a huge problem that required a radical solution: a target that would have achieved a monumental reduction in the number of people entering the country. (*Guardian* 21/06/16)

FIGURE 1

Concordance of anti-immigration in the pro-Remain newspapers

N	Concordance
1	claimed the campaign to leave had been hijacked by the anti-immigration of Nigel Farage, Ukip’s leader.
2	for her death not to be “hijacked by groups with an anti-immigration agenda”. In practice, Britain already
3	Let’s not be seduced by this lie from people who are anti-immigration and who have spent their lives
4	House. Obama did not retain it. Related. Nigel Farage’s anti-immigration chant strikes a chord with US
5	Spring, was designed to strengthen cooperation among anti-immigration, Europhobic movements that have been
6	social damage Gove and Johnson leave by stirring anti-immigration fear But Gove and Johnson treat facts
7	is the lasting social damage they leave by stirring anti-immigration fears. Even if they lose, David
8	Heavy mob, led by Nigel Farage. Vote Leave prefers its anti-immigration message to be discreet. There but not
9	and Michael Gove. It is embarrassed by the aggressive anti-immigration message being pushed by the Heavy
10	said ethnic minorities were much less likely to find the anti-immigration message of the leave campaign
11	politics may be affected negatively by Brexit. The anti-immigration mood driving Donald Trump would
12	the backing of Republican voters on a staunchly anti-immigration platform, said that his support for the
13	Gove is so offended by Nigel Farage’s vile and racist anti-immigration poster (Report, 20 June), why doesn’t
14	June 19, 2016 Sunday 2 28 PM GMT Nigel Farage’s anti-immigration poster splits Brexit camps. Leading
15	national TV. Cue the racist backlash; The inflammatory anti-immigration rhetoric in the EU debate has become a
16	their identity or nationality because of his inflammatory anti-immigration rhetoric. He told me my outlook
17	the safety of the citizens who live in Britain already. The anti-immigration rhetoric at the forefront of the EU
18	shied away from pandering to xenophobia and using anti-immigration rhetoric to galvanise support. After all,
19	Instead, much of the campaign has focused on inflated anti-immigration rhetoric and demagoguery. One
20	the leave campaign. But Cameron’s pledge also fuelled anti-immigration sentiment. He framed mass immigration
21	reeling from cuts - these are all social problems fuelling anti-immigration sentiment, and they would only get
22	reaching at least some of them - while maintaining their anti-immigration stance. Somehow they’ve managed to
23	evidence suggests a link between the predominance of anti-immigration stories and the weeks in which the
24	for Brexit clear in recent weeks, with an emphasis on anti-immigration stories, while the Mail on Sunday came
25	that everybody who wants to leave the EU must be anti-immigration, wants to pull up the drawbridge and so

To cross-check and avoid being accused of cherry-picking, we looked for any evidence of attempts to talk about immigration from a more positive perspective. The *Guardian* reports opinions in favour of immigration, for instance, Hilary Benn, the Labour shadow foreign secretary made “a passionate case in favour of the benefits of immigration” (*Guardian* 13/06/16) and Andy Burnham,

the Labour shadow home secretary, “gave a firm defence of the role immigrants play in the NHS” (*Guardian* 20/06/16). The *Daily Mirror* reports data from Migration Watch:

A report by Right-wing pressure group Migration Watch will admit today the financial **benefits of recent migration** from the original 14 EU countries outweighs any cost incurred from the numbers arriving from Eastern Europe. [...] A second report by the academics cited by Migration Watch also said EU migrants have made a positive contribution to the UK economy. (*Daily Mirror* 20/06/16)

As regards the pro-Leave press, The *Telegraph* reports opinions in favour of immigration, but only under certain conditions, namely, if Britain exits from the EU. This extract, quoting Boris Johnson, condenses the main ideas:

Mr Johnson yesterday said he is “**pro-immigration**” and that it is “fair” and “humane” to grant illegal immigrants an amnesty. He said: “I am in favour of an amnesty of illegal immigrants who have been here for more than 12 years, unable to contribute to this economy, unable to pay taxes, unable to take proper part in society. I’ll tell you why. Because it is the humane thing to do, it is the economically rational thing to do. **If we take back control of our immigration system** with an Australian-style points based system, we’ll be dealing fairly and justly with every part of the world and we will be neutralising people in this country and across Europe who wish to play politics with immigration and who are opposed to immigrants.” (*Daily Telegraph* 20/06/16)

4. The result and post-vote Britain

4.1. First reactions

At this point, an analysis of the post-Brexit vote corpus was necessary to understand how the Leave victory was received by the press. How was the event reported immediately after the vote had been cast? In the post-Brexit corpus, we looked for collocations of *result*:

On the pro-Leave side, the *Daily Mail* wrote ‘The **historic result** could see us embarking on a path to an enlightened era of prosperous global trade, freed from the shackles of unelected Brussels bureaucracy’ (*Daily Mail* 24/06/16)

Note the array of positive evaluations, *historic*, *enlightened*, *prosperous*, *freed*, even *embarking* has a positive semantic/evaluative prosody. For the Leave side, then, after getting over their initial surprise at having actually won, the result brought optimism about Britain's future ahead of Brexit.

Furthermore, the *Telegraph* emphasised its belief that the economic consequences of the vote were not as brutal as experts had predicted, indeed, quite the opposite:

The referendum **result caused pandemonium** in the markets – and **gave rise to opportunities**. (*Daily Telegraph* 02/07/16)

Markit said the fall in the value of the pound triggered by the referendum result had **helped to push up overseas orders**, while **domestic output also bounced back** and **employment rose** for the first time this year. (*Daily Telegraph* 02/09/16)

On the losing Remain side, the *Guardian*, in a piece published in the early hours of June 24, when the results of the vote were clear, referred to Brexit as an “earthquake”, “the rubble [which] will take years to clear”. The majority of the articles expressed a sense of uncertainty and disappointment generated by the result. In some cases, the outcome was defined as *bruising*, *cataclysmic*, *disastrous* as well as a *shock*.

The next question is what does post-Brexit Britain look like according to the two sets of newspapers? A concordance of *post-Brexit* was prepared for the pro-Leave and pro-Remain corpora separately. The *Telegraph* and the *Mail's* articles showed awareness that the post-Brexit might be a *challenging* and *uncertain* time, but it is also a time that could offer Britain new opportunities, especially for the economy. Moreover, a *post-Brexit strategy* is necessary, especially to face the immigration issue. Overall, *post-Brexit Britain* is portrayed as *attractive* to investments, entrepreneurs and tourism. The extract below condensed the most common pro-Leave view:

In another bad day for embittered Remain campaigners, more cheering signs emerged that our **post-Brexit future** may be far brighter than the doom-mongers would have us believe. (*Daily Mail* 19/08/16)

Completely different is the post-Brexit Britain described by the *Guardian* and *Mirror*, characterised by *tensions*, *turmoil* and *racism*.

Other common collocates of *post-Brexit* include *anxieties*, *crisis*, *fears* and *risks*. However, the occasional positive perspective was also found, as in these headlines: “Post-Brexit crisis, what crisis? The FTSE 100 is roaring ahead” (*Guardian* 01/07/16) and “Brexit could help revive British manufacturing” (*Guardian* 19/07/16).

The next step was to identify the most discussed themes in the pro-Leave and pro-Remain newspapers over the full three months following the vote; to this end the Keyword tool was used to compare the key items of the two sub-corpora.

4.2. Pro-Leave reactions

As mentioned in the previous section, the pro-Leave *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* welcomed the referendum result and reported the – in their view – positive impact it had on the British economy. Table 3, lists a selection of fifteen terms that were significantly more frequent in the pro-Leave newspapers than in the pro-Remain, all appearing among the top 120 items¹.

TABLE 3
Fifteen selected pro-Leave keywords

BUSINESS
COMPANIES
CUSTOMERS
INVESTORS
MARKET
TRADE
DOOM
DEALS
BOOST
SHARES
SALES
OPPORTUNITIES
INCOME
GROWTH
INVEST

¹ Both Leave and Remain keywords were calculated by the *WordSmith 5* Keyword tool, $p = 0.00001$ and then also by AntConc 3.4.4. using both log-likelihood and chi-squared default measures. The lists contained the same items we discuss in the text.

The majority of the terms are economy-related. This might come as a surprise given how the destiny of the economy was alleged, by the Remain campaign, to be the Achilles' heel of the Leave campaign. We then concordanced in greater detail two words of these items with a strong positive connotation, *boost* and *opportunities*.

The word *boost* is defined by the OED as "A lift, a shove up; help, encouragement (by means of publicity, etc.), increase (in value, reputation, etc.)." Even though the definition does not directly associate the word to the field of economics, in the corpus, *boost* is often used in relations to terms such as *economy*, *growth*, *industry*, *investment* or *sales*. A boost in British *tourism* as well is mentioned. Furthermore, the term is often found in the collocation *Brexit boost* or *post-Brexit boost*, emphasising the Leavers' conviction that the boost was a direct consequence of the vote:

Post-Brexit boost for UK as China hints at trade deal (*Telegraph* 07/07/16)

The staggering extent of the **post-Brexit boost** to tourism in Britain is revealed today in official figures showing billions more pounds flowing into the industry. (*Mail on Sunday* 21/08/16)

The concordance of *opportunities* confirms the Brexiters' belief that the June vote opened new possibilities of improvement for Britain in general and especially for its economy, in sharp contrast to the pre-referendum dark warnings of the Remain campaign. The adjectives describing these opportunities are extremely positive: *desirable*, *fantastic*, *huge*, *significant*, *tremendous*:

Maastricht and successive EU treaties tied our hands. By contrast, Brexit should create new "**desirable**" **opportunities** for many departments. (*Telegraph* 31/08/16)

Leaving the EU presents **tremendous opportunities** to develop new agricultural, fisheries and environment policies tailored specifically to the industry and landscape of the United Kingdom, as well as our wildlife [...] (*Telegraph* 16/09/16)

Britain and the British people are encouraged to seize these opportunities and make the most of them.

Among the pro-Leave keywords was also the negative term *doom*. It is used to emphasise the fact that the negative predictions

made by Remain supporters of the consequences of Brexit were *not* fulfilled after the vote:

In the UK, post-referendum **predictions of doom** did not come true. But the economic situation remains testing. (*Telegraph* 06/09/16)

The Bank and the Treasury have lost credibility; By trumpeting **unfulfilled prophecies of doom** about Brexit, they have reduced our faith in their judgment (*Telegraph* 09/09/16)

In a smaller number of cases, *doom* appeared in the constructions *doom-mongering* and *doom-laden* and in the expression *doom and gloom*, always with reference to the warnings of Remainers, as illustrated in the representative examples below:

The forecasts represent a climbdown for the global financial watchdog after it issued a string of **doom-laden warnings** over the damage Brexit would do. (*Daily Mail* 20/07/16)

Speaking on the eve of the second anniversary of the referendum on breaking up Britain, the Scottish Secretary will attack the First Minister's "**doom-mongering warnings**" and suggest they are designed to make separation appear the safest option rather than provide a truthful analysis. (*Daily Telegraph* 17/09/16)

Professor Patrick Minford, a former adviser to Margaret Thatcher who co-chaired campaign group Economists For Brexit, said: This goes to show that all these warnings and **doom and gloom predictions** from the Bank were plucked out of thin air. (*Daily Mail* 22/07/16)

From this brief investigation into how the short-term consequences of the vote were constructed in the pro-Leave newspapers, we can see that the economy constitutes the core of the discussion. To a lesser extent, there is also an interest in undermining the credibility of those authorities which imagined a doomsday scenario that has not come to pass.

4.3. Pro-Remain reactions

In contrast to the pro-Leave newspapers, in the pro-Remain press what emerges clearly is a focus on the putative social consequences of Brexit rather than on the economic ones. Table 4 shows a selection

of keywords in the pro-Remain corpus, all appearing among the top 120 items. These words suggest that attention was paid to the alleged episodes of racism which occurred in the immediate aftermath of the vote.

TABLE 4

Fifteen selected pro-Remain keywords

FEEL
SOCIAL
XENOPHOBIC
POLISH
RACIST
COMMUNITY
RACISM
XENOPHOBIA
BORDER
INEQUALITY
MUSLIM
ATTACK
FIGHT
INCIDENTS
FEELINGS

A closer analysis of the concordance lines of *racis** and *xenophobi** in the pro-Remain corpus showed that the two terms often co-occurred, showing how the two concepts are perceived as connected. The adjectives *racist* and *xenophobic* very frequently collocated with words like *abuse*, *attack*, *crimes*, *disorder* or *incidents*. The referendum result – together with the pro-Leave campaign rhetoric of the previous months – is reported as an event that fuelled a climate of racism and xenophobia.

In the key word list, the terms *Polish* and *Muslim* suggested who the targets of these attacks were said to be, as confirmed in the fragments below:

The Polish embassy in the UK said it was shocked at incidents of **xenophobic abuse** directed at members of its community in the past few days, and the Board of Deputies of British Jews said it was alarmed by reports of harassment and abuse. (*Guardian* 27/06/16)

The National Police Chiefs' Council said harsh sentences would be handed

down to anyone convicted of **racist disorder**. It comes after Polish and Muslim communities reported being targeted. (*Daily Mirror* 28/06/16)

The *Guardian* (27/06/16) affirmed that “more than 100 reports of racist incidents” were collated in the week after the referendum. To claim the insurgence of racism and xenophobia was solely due to the vote would be overly simplistic. However, the message that Brexit and an increase in hate crimes are connected resonated and was reinforced in the post-referendum coverage of the *Guardian* and the *Mirror*.

Other two keywords examined were *feel* and *feelings*. How did people feel after the result was announced? What kind of feelings were most common in the post-Brexit Britain? The feelings that were taken into account in the pro-Remain press were mainly negative ones. Unsurprisingly, people who wanted to remain and voted for it felt *sad*, *scared*, *upset* and *shocked* by the result. Many felt *betrayed* by the government and by politicians who “let this happen”. Feelings were described with adjectives as *bad*, *destructive*, *hurt*, even *apocalyptic*. Among the Remainers, members of ethnic minorities were said to feel *unsafe*, *vulnerable* and *no longer welcome* in Britain.

Other less predictable emotions seemed to be alleged *regret* for what could have been done differently and a supposed post-vote *guilt* and even “buyer’s remorse” on the part of Brexiters:

Some people are reporting **feelings that they should have done more** to prevent the country from leaving the EU. They feel narrow-minded for not questioning that the remain camp might not win, and **they feel guilt** for not better understanding the majority of people they share the country with. (*Guardian* 30/06/16)

Among **the regretful leave voters** who spoke to the *Guardian*, some expressed **shock** at the ramifications of what they had meant as a protest vote. Others expressed **feelings of betrayal** over the leave campaign’s rhetoric, the promises and the subsequent backpedaling by politicians. (*Guardian* 27/06/16)

In contrast, an article by the *Daily Mirror* claimed that:

The 52% who voted for Britain to quit the EU do not regret their decision, says the UK’s top polling expert. Prof John Curtice said claims by the

Remain camp of “buyer’s remorse” among Brexit supporters was “wishful thinking”. (*Daily Mirror* 22/09/16)

It may be argued that the positive reactions of those who chose Brexit and were happy with their choice and the result were not given much coverage in the pro-Remain newspapers, with a few exceptions. For instance, a pro-Remain *Guardian* journalist asking people to express in one word how they felt about the referendum result reported that:

Only one passerby went the other way: “Great – I’ve woke up English,” he said, and with a look of deep joy, went on his way. (*Guardian* 26/06/16)

5. Conclusions

The ability of the newspaper media to influence both voters and politicians, even indirectly, is easier to assume than to gauge. The many factors and influences that intervene between people’s reception of a message from the media and the way in which they make a political decision are difficult to measure. Moreover, newspaper messages exist alongside, both in symbiosis but also in competition with, messages from very many other sources, TV, social media, paid-for placards (including one infamous anti-immigration poster) and even slogans on the sides of a bus. However, newspapers certainly play a part in building and shaping political discourse and this was one of the main reasons why we decided to take a closer look at the language of the newspapers before and after the referendum, using CADS methodologies.

As regards the pre-vote articles, we were interested in the representation of the referendum itself, in the relevance of fear during the debate with accusations of *scare- fear- and doom-mongering* and in how discussions on immigration resonated in the press. As regards the post-Brexit articles, we looked at reactions to the result and at the topics that received most attention in the discussion after the vote. Evidence suggests that the elation of the Leave newspapers was considerably more muted than expected, and largely characterised by trepidation over the potential economic consequences. However, after the much-forecasted implosion of the economy failed to occur, the Leave newspapers became more

relaxed and radiant. The Remain newspapers, on the other hand, reacted more emotionally, expressing considerable sadness and anger against the Brexit media and voters.

The use of corpus linguistics and in particular CADS techniques, allowed us to obtain an overview of the debate on both sides, while at the same time providing indications of where to look for the most relevant details in the actual discussions. Our overall lasting impression is one of two deeply divided camps, neither of which could even begin to understand the reasoning and motivation of the other.

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