Book Reviews

The language of Brexit, or why words matter

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Steve Buckledee 2018. *The Language of Brexit: How Britain Talked Its Way Out of the European Union*. London: Bloomsbury, vi+231pp., £60 (HB), ISBN: 978 - 1- 3500-4797-6

Brexit entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* in December 2016, six months after the infamous referendum, in which a marginal majority voted for the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the European Union (EU). The June 2016 referendum was followed by the formal governmental announcement of the country's withdrawal in March 2017, initiating the Brexit process due to conclude no later than January 2020. Admittedly, Brexit debates reinforced the old divide between Eurosceptics and pro-Europeanists, now addressed as *leavers* and *remainers* with both sides spanning the whole of the political spectrum. Most crucially, that was not the first time Brits were asked about their country's connection to the EU. The prelude of this uneasy relation was also marked by a referendum. Two years after the UK entry to the European Economic Community (EEC), its membership was endorsed in the 1975 referendum, promised by the Labour Party's manifesto for the upcoming general election. The country's relation to Europe was thus marked, right from the beginning. by the 'people's voice', a memory that quite predictably resurfaced with the debates on Brexit (i.e. the 2011 cross-party People's Pledge campaign).

Even those least acquainted with British politics are well aware that Euroscepticism has historically been far from a distinctive feature of the Conservative rationale. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, withdrawal from the EC was mostly advocated by the Left and was even part of the Labour Party's 1983 election manifesto. The beginning of the end of this uneasy relation should be traced back in the early 1990s, when the EU's founding Maastricht Treaty (1992) was *not* put to a referendum in the UK. Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party fiercely opposed to the ratification of the treaty. The rise of right-wing populism and the formation of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in 1993 capitalised reactions and reinforced Euroscepticism. As Tory unity was put at stake Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, himself a remainer, eventually opted to invest more in saving his party than guaranteeing his country's future in the EU, by deciding to hold a referendum on continued EU membership.

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This short summary of the UK's relation to the EU (in all its forms) serves neither as an inclusive (pre-)history of Brexit nor as an account of the developments that have led us to the contemporary predicament. It serves here as the background of evaluating the merits and shortcomings of Steve Buckledee's book titled *The Language of Brexit: How Britain Talked Its Way Out of the European Union* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). As the author admits in his Introduction (p. 3), the book is based on data collected in the first six months of 2016. In that sense, the 'language of Brexit' under scrutiny here is the one articulated during this very period. As critical as this historically specific 'language' may have been —given that both Leave and Remain campaigns reached their climax during the examined period— the book's analysis unavoidably neglects a number of preceding or parallel contexts and discourses. This preliminary remark is important for the analysis that follows the short presentation of the book content and chapters.

Buckledee's main thesis is that the outcome of the Brexit referendum owes much to the successful linguistic strategy and discursive mechanism of the Leave campaign. Put mildly, the outcome of this referendum may be largely explained by the fact that the language of leavers has been more persuasive than that of remainers. The book is divided in two parts. In the first part (Chapters 1-8) the author compares the linguistic strategies followed by both Remain and Leave campaigns, within the context of coordinative constructions, hedging and modality imperatives, inclusive *we* and racism. The second part (Chapters (9-15) compares the Brexit discourse in particular with the ones deployed during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, and the 1975 referendum on the public endorsement of the UK's membership in the EEC.

In Chapter 1, the author addresses his core thesis and sets sail to substantiate his arguments by first examining how the *BUT* coordinative constructions (Huddlestone 1984; Jeffries 2010) of the Remain discourse (e.g. 'Finite clause critical of EU + BUT + Finite clause presenting Remain as preferred option') —as opposed to the affirmative, clear and monoglossic assertion of the Leave discourse— largely contributed to the persuasiveness of the latter. In a nutshell, Buckledee starts by pointing out the failure of the Remain linguistic strategy to provide a strong and convincing argument *for Remain*, rather than a mere counterargument to Brexit. This thesis is further reinforced in Chapter 2, where the author juxtaposes the frequent use of hedging and modality (Bloor and Bloor 2013; Machin and Mayr 2012; Brown and Levinson 1978; Crystal 1994; Grice 1975; Grundy 2008; Fairclough 2001; 2003) in the Remain camp versus the strident claims and apparent absence of doubt in the Leave camp. Uncertainty about the real consequences of Brexit further limited the persuasiveness of remainers.

Chapter 3 focuses on the ample use of imperatives (Huddlestone 1984; 1988; see also Austin 1962; Searle 1969) in the Leave discourse as a linguistic strategy that strengthened its populist resonance. This resonance was further supported by the linguistic formation of the illusion of a 'classless alliance' through the extensive use of inclusive *we* (Crystal 1994). Chapter 4 examines how this *we* addressed all those 'ignored' and 'marginalized', an imaginary reconstruction of 'the people', against 'the elites' and 'the establishment', although employed

by key leavers who most clearly belonged to the latter (i.e. Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson). The extensive use of *we* and *they* reinforced a feeling of both belonging (to the British people) and exclusion (from continental Europe), thus further strengthening solidarity and othering.

Chapters 5 and 6 show how the leavers' linguistic strategy redefined not only the content of 'the people', but also those of 'democracy' and 'freedom', by constructing a clear dichotomy between an undemocratic and un-free EU and a free and democratic Britain. Interestingly enough, this was accomplished through the use of the same symbolic tools and narratives already dominant in the European liberal democratic discourse in the construction of its own identity against the undemocratic and un-free space of the 'old Soviet Union'. The EU was hence depicted as 'the old Soviet Union dressed in Western clothes.' Of course, the fact that the Remain discourse openly admitted the democratic deficit of the EU did not particularly help subvert this narrative.

In Chapter 7 it is suggested that the use of nominalization, presuppositions and adjective compounds (Machin and Mayr 2012; Jeffries 2010) in the Leave campaign allowed for the naturalization of their claims as established facts. Chapter 8 closes the book's first part by showing how the use of emotive language, negative metaphors, derogative terms and classifiers allowed the Leave camp to cover up a clearly racist language while addressing and framing one of the most mobilizing agendas in post-crisis Britain, immigration.

Chapter 9 opens the second part of the book by comparing how the so-called 'Project Fear' functioned in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 Brexit one. First coined in 2014, the term 'Project Fear' has been used in a pejorative sense to equate with scaremongering and pessimism any claim of economic, social and political danger resulting from change to the status quo. According to Buckledee, 'Project Fear' failed to work in the 2016 referendum because the consequences of Brexit were less predictable or apparent, a clear failure of the linguistic strategy opted in the Remain camp.

In Chapter 10, which effectively continues the argument made in Chapter 8, the author returns to his analysis of the emotive language used by leavers to metaphorically connect a resounding and proud voice of the British people to leave a (German-run) EU with the one reached to enter the Second World War (again against Germany). Chapter 11 starts by commenting on remainers' portrayal of leavers as 'Little Englanders' nostalgic of isolationist times well bygone, and on leavers' response that it was the EU that has been self-absorbed and provincial in its policies. This discourse is then used by the author as the platform for comparing the 1975 and 2016 referenda and commenting on the U-turn of some notable British tabloids from a pro-EEC to a pro-Brexit discourse.

By focusing on pro-Brexit tabloid media - *The Sun* in particular - Chapter 12 continues by suggesting that it was those tabloids that set the discussion agenda in the country, rather than the pro-Remain ones. As a result, the overall discourse on Brexit (or not) was fundamentally based less on an informed discussion than on journalistic manipulation; less on facts than on the emotions of a public incapable of assessing the true consequences of Brexit. This becomes

even more apparent in Chapter 13, where the author presents this journalistic manipulation by both pro-Brexit and pro-Remain media through lies, exaggerations, personal attacks and similar 'dirty tricks'. Chapter 14 focuses on the predictable media reactions to the unprecedented outcome of the referendum, at least for the Remain camp. Chapter 15 closes the book by noting the influence of Brexit on the post-referendum divided Britain (Goodhart 2017; Runciman 2016), and the continuing role and manipulating power (see Short 1996) of tabloid media in the country, a point further reinforced in the book's epilogue.

Admittedly, there are many aspects relevant to the theme and scope of this book left unexamined. One would expect to read more on what preceded the six-month period examined (always with respect to rhetoric and linguistic strategy). Yet the author has made it clear in his introduction that all data examined were collected during the aforementioned period. Consequently, this book is more on 'the Brexit language' of this short, pre-referendum period. This should have not however limited the breadth and scope of its overall analysis, which could have been significantly enriched by contextualizing the themes examined (Widdowson 2004) in relevant preceding discourses in Britain, and/or by connecting them with parallel relevant ones within and outside the UK (i.e. economic crisis, 'refugee crisis', rise of right-wing populism, neo-nationalism, 'anti-systemic' thought, possible Grexit, Italexit, etc.). Times were still pregnant and the impact of this momentum is left unexamined.

My main problem with the book, however, is that the use of data remains undertheorized. Besides the limited number of linguistics references used (almost all sources are quoted in this review), the author does not address a wider literature that would have allowed him to discuss many aspects of his own themes (e.g. self/other, populism, national pride, exceptionalism etc.) in greater depth and wider scope (i.e. ideology, rhetoric, imagination, discourse analysis, or identity). The author's emphasis on rendering the linguistic perspective accessible to a wider audience, or his attempt to provide an inclusive account of all available data in media and political discourse should not have hampered the critical investigation of that material.

Despite the above, Steve Buckledee's book is notable still for a number of reasons. First, it draws its power from its very focus of inquiry: one of the most divisive moments in the long political history of a Kingdom *United*. Second, it is notable because of its delving into an issue that is painfully topical and still ongoing, its full development and repercussions remaining unclear at the stage of research and writing (and reading). Third, and as a corollary, the fact that the book was released immediately following the beginning of the Brexit negotiations, opens the academic discussion of this process (at all levels) as one heavily reliant on language. Fourth, as already noted above, the author manages to render the linguistic concepts he discusses fully accessible to the reader. His examples are helpful in this respect. Fifth, although the author admittedly situates himself on a particular strand of this discursive battle, his view remains balanced and respectful to both strands. His actual presence abroad (Italy) during the period examined seems to have contributed to a more balanced perspective. Overall, Buckledee's book is recommended because it serves as a convincing reminder that, as in all matters of human affairs, words do matter.

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