THE CONFLICTING RHETORIC OF BREXIT IN THE WRITTEN PRESS

Gabriela-Viorica Iordachescu
PhD Student, Army Academy of Sibiu

Abstract: *The United Kingdom's withdrawal from European Union has been discussed in the media all over the world with the term "Brexit" extensively for the last three years. The role of the written press has been an important issue around the Brexit decision, which had its peak in June 2016. The results of the EU Referendum took everyone by surprise, including the Leave camp. In understanding how the media influenced the referendum results. It is important to recognise* that before the *campaign even began the large parts of the public had been primed by the media to be Eurosceptic. During the campaign the Leave campaign was able to build on this through appeals that highlighted long established themes around sovereignty and immigration. In contrast the Remain campaign was unable to build a positive case for Europe partly because those narratives had not been comprehensively established in the past by media and politicians. Therefore, even if Remain had consistently put forward arguments about the social and cultural and benefits of EU membership they would have not resonated effectively because they lacked social currency. In this way the media played a powerful long and short term role in influencing the result of the Referendum. In order to detect bias in editorials, this study uses Critical Discourse Analysis, based on such important approaches as those of Norman Fairclough and of Ruth Wodak. CDA is a relatively new research orientation which is used to study the relationship between a text and its social context, with such concepts as discourse, power, and ideology figuring prominently. It primarily focusses on revealing relationships of inequality, dominance, disempowerment and bias. In a 2007 interview, Wodak states that there are various approaches with regard to CDA and theses approaches have their own methods and methodology. Nevertheless, in spite of this bewildering variety of methods and approaches, a number of issues, concepts, and ideas will be found very useful in the current research.*

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideology, Text, Power, Written press

Introduction

Brexit is the June 23, 2016, referendum where the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. The residents decided that the benefits of belonging to the unified monetary body no longer outweighed the costs of free movement of immigration. Brexit is the nickname for "British exit" from the EU.

This research will seek to demonstrate how the use language in Britain's EU referendum shifted from that of persuasion to that of overt prejudice and xenophobia. It will also seek to demonstrate how some of the British newspapers replaced the truth and objective facts with pro-Brexit emotive rhetoric, typical of the post-truth politics of the age.

We all know that rhetoric is an ancient art of using language to persuade. If you use it well, your audience will easily understand what you're saying, and will be influenced by your message. The term "rhetoric" in modern language has been used to refer to arguments that are designed to obscure the truth. The word has therefore taken on a negative connotation. Why conflict rhetoric? Conflict is omnipresent in human behaviour. So is rhetoric in conflict situations. The entire Brexit campaign on both sides had conflicting ideas in its discourse.

Contextualising Brexit

BDD-A28617 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:10 UTC)

I chose Britain exit from the European Union as a subject for my research because it is a matter of tremendous importance for the future of both the UK and the EU. For the current research and more specifically, of particular interest will be the importance of types of figurative language, specific rhetorical approaches in a large scale campaign affecting the whole of the European population, in the first place, the whole world in general.

For decades, the United Kingdom has had an ambivalent and sometimes contentious relationship with the European Union. London has kept its distance from Brussels's authority by negotiating opt-outs from some of the EU's central policies, including the common euro currency and the border-free Schengen area.

The research addresses the written press and it is focused on an in-depth analysis of the positions adopted by British newspapers in their editorials. Why written press? I used newspapers as a resource because newspapers feature influential texts, because they engage in a dynamic dialogue with other voices on matters of current interest, reaching a large number of people of various orientations. Written texts in general are more difficult to cope with deciding what the intended meaning of somebody is might be less easy to get than in face to face communication. If in quality literary fiction this difficulty is part of the game, with the reader working hard to make sense of the complexity of the literary world in which he or she is immersed, in newspaper articles intention is supposed to be more straightforwardly expressed. The author is very much alive, and he or she wants to convey clear meanings. Like in quality fiction, the journalist uses emotional language meant to impress and persuade, in order to get things done. Writing, both literary and journalistic gives a kind of power to the author. Editorials in newspapers are particularly important texts. That is why, the current research intends to focus on editorials more than on the other articles in various influential publications. Why an editorial? As known, an editorial is the place where the process of selecting a particular ideological position is clarified and re-established, usually reflecting a certain orientation of the newspaper as a whole. It is also the place where the paper speaks directly to its readership, presenting its perception of "reality" in the form which is considered to be the most suitable for its readership.

The British print press system is very diverse and knows two distinctions, that of popular versus quality press, and that of left- versus right-leaning press. There are differences between, for example, the lay-out and composition of a quality or a popular paper as well as between the language and word choice. Popular papers intend to be "eye-catching" whereas quality press choose a more neutral lay-out, quality papers use formal language whilst popular papers might use colloquial English. The second distinction between British newspapers is that of left- or right-leaning papers, terms which refer to the affiliations of newspapers with a certain left- or right-wing political party. During Brexit campaign, newspapers have made no effort in hiding those affiliations. For example, *The Daily Mail*, a "midmarket" paper, meaning nor a quality, nor a popular paper, supported the Conservative Party (the right-wing). *The Daily Mirror* is considered to be a popular or a "red top" newspaper and a strong supporter of the Labour party. *The Telegraph* is considered to be one of the most well-known and read quality newspaper together with *The Times* and *The Guardian* and it is described as a quality newspaper giving moderate support to the Conservative Party. The last example will be *The Guardian*, as already mentioned, belongs to the quality newspapers and it is a strong supporter of the Remainers.

The corpus in this study consists of articles that covered the topic of Brexit. The newspapers were chosen according to some criteria like: they have officially announced their stance on Brexit through an editorial opinion, they have the highest number of readership amongst UK printed media and the time when they were publish: during or after the campaign. *The Sun*, *Daily Express*, as well as the *Daily Telegraph* all pledged their support towards leaving the EU, whereas the typically pro-EU dailies, namely *The Guardian*, *Daily*

BDD-A28617 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:10 UTC)

Mirror and *Financial Times* declared in favour of Remain. The only Eurosceptic newspaper to support staying in the EU was the Murdoch-owned *Times* and *Sunday*.
Covering the both sides, Remain and Leave, and using several popular and quality newspapers, the research will make it possible to detect contrasts and similarities in terms of bias in the treatment of the parties.

For the time frame, the period of the Referendum is the most revealing for this research. The critical dates: the 23rd and the 24th of June 2016, the day before and the day after the results were announced, reshaped Europe. Newspapers from all over Britain and EU published facts and opinions in their editorials about the event. The articles published after Brexit are considered to be of great importance due to the several possible courses of action this event can take between its veto and its de facto.

Based on the above mentioned arguments, the present study tries to find out to what extent language affects a particular piece of writing by answering such questions as:

- To what extent are general news articles biased in the coverage of Ukip compared to the coverage of mainstream party?
- Which rhetorical devices are mainly used in the editorials of *The Guardian*, *The Daily Express* and *The Sun*? Are there any differences between the editorials of *The Guardian, The Telegraph* (the quality press), *The Daily Express* and *The Sun* (the popular press) in terms of using rhetorical devices?

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) "is the uncovering of implicit ideologies in texts. It unveils the underlying ideological prejudices and therefore the exercise of power in texts" (Widdoson, 2000). Due to the width of the topic, various approaches to CDA can be used in order to analyse the journalistic discourse. The roots of CDA are in critical theory and it is used to refer to "any theory concerned with critique of ideology and the effects of domination" (Fairclough, 1995, p.20). . These approaches differ in terms of theoretical foundations and the tools they use to analyse discourse, but the concepts of ideology, critique, and power are present in all of them. In addition, this study will accentuate the interdisciplinary nature of CDA and showing the dialectic relationship between language, culture, society, and politics.

The "dialectical-relational approach" of Norman Fairclough (1995), professor of Linguists at Lancaster University and one of the founders of critical discourse analysis, investigates the dialectical relationship between semiosis, which refers to all types of language, and social practices or the social environment. According to Fairclough, CDA provides a way of moving between close analysis of texts and interactions, and social analysis of various types. CDA aims to show non-obvious ways in which language is involved in social life, including social relations of power and domination, and in ideology; and points to possibilities for change. It is a resource which can be used in combination with others for researching change in contemporary social life. CDA sees itself as politically involved research with an emancipatory requirement: it seeks to have an effect on social practice and social relationships. Fairclough understands CDA to be concerned with the investigation of the tension between the two assumptions about language use: that language is both socially constitutive and socially determined. The research in this paper will be analysing newspaper editorials and will thus focus on written language rather than other on other forms of semiosis. Fairclough's approach is "a more accessible method" (Richardson 2007. 37) than others with regard to "doing CDA" due to the fact that he sees discourse as a three-dimensional concept: every discourse is simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of a discursive practice and an instance of a social practice. This three-dimensional view of

BDD-A28617 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:10 UTC)

discourse aims to connect an analysis of the linguistic "texture" of the text production, interpretation and distribution and all these in turn to social practices, seen in relation to social struggles and social structures. When regarded as text, discourse is analysed from the point of view of content and form; discursive practice involves processes of the text production, distribution and consumption; social practice relates discourse to ideology and to power.

The first stage, the textual analysis, examines the choices the author of a text makes in terms of content by analysing not only linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary or grammar, but also by analysing how a text is organised, for example, how cohesive the text is (Richardson 2007). More importantly, however, is what such linguistic aspects or such text organisation means, that is, "in relation to their direct or indirect involvement in reproducing or resisting the systems of ideology and social power" (Richardson 2007. 39). This is exactly why CDA is so interesting for the research in this paper, that is, it will be examining whether, and if so, how language in British newspaper articles is used to obtain social power or how certain ideologies are hidden in news articles. The second stage of Fairclough's CDA is a discourse analysis as it includes discursive practices. The discourse analysis examines the production of a text, the rules a writer has to respect when writing a text in a particular genre, the reception of a text, how readers read and interpret a text, and the social environment in which both processes take place (Richardson 2007). Both the process of production and that of reception are named "a two-way street" (Richardson 2007. 40). The producer or the author can influence a text by encoding a message in it, but the text is able to influence the producer as well as he has to comply with certain conventions of the text, that is, each text genre has its own conventions. With regard to the reading process, a reader at first receives and understands the message, ideological or not, but also decodes the text, meaning he can disagree with the message (Richardson 2007). The third and final stage of Fairclough's CDA includes the social practices or the social environment in which the text is written (Richardson 2007). In this stage the aspects of the previous stages, textual and discourse analysis, will be critically analysed in terms of ethics and politics. This analysis will expose and question the power abuse or hidden ideologies and could give information about the kind of society it was written in and which effect such text might have on that society (Richardson 2007).

The second often cited approach to Critical Discourse Analysis is that of Teun A. van Dijk, the so-called "social-cognitive approach". In many books, essays or papers on CDA van Dijk himself, however, mentions he does not like to be associated with a certain "approach", he rather describes his ideas of CDA as guidelines. Van Dijk advocates a diverse CDA, meaning researchers doing CDA should not just copy one's approach or guidelines, but rather implement theories from different people and from different disciplines. This point of view causes his "approach" to also be called multidisciplinary CDA (Wodak & Meyer 2001). In contrast to the previous approach, Fairclough's CDA, van Dijk does not analyse the relationship between discourse and its social environment, but the relationship of those two with a third component, that is, cognition (Angermüller, Maingueneau & Wodak 2014). In the following paragraph these three components or dimensions, the so-called "discourse-cognition-society triangle" (Wodak & Meyer 2001. 98), will be explained in more detail and it will describe what their role is in van Dijk's CDA. The first dimension is discourse. According to van Dijk a complete discourse analysis would be too extensive and researchers have to be selective as there are too many aspects or structures to be analysed within a text or discourse. Examples of such structures are lexical choices, stress and intonation, word order or propositions (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Researches therefore have to make a selection of structures that are relevant for their study. As van Dijk suggests: if we want to study - as would be typical in CDA – the ways some speakers or writers exercise power in or by their

BDD-A28617 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:10 UTC)

discourse, it only makes sense to study those properties that can vary as a function of social power (Wodak & Meyer 2001. 99). So it is important to understand how structures are related to their social environment (Wodak & Meyer 2001). For the research in this paper for example that means selecting those aspects or structures in newspaper articles which can be used to express the author's opinions or ideologies in order to influence the reader and thus society. The second component of van Dijk's CDA theory is cognition, and specifically social cognition (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Social cognition or the cognition of groups or organizations refers to their ideology, attitude and knowledge. These three notions are able to influence discourse or language and consequently how such discourse or language is interpreted (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Nevertheless, discourse and language in turn, may influence the social cognition, as people or groups or organizations obtain their knowledge, ideologies and attitudes from "everyday discourse such as, conversations, news reports and textbooks" (Wodak & Meyer 2001. 114). The third and final dimension of van Dijk's CDA is society. When talking about society he pictures two kinds of society: one at a local or micro level and one at a more global level. The first one can refer to, for example, face-to-face interactions, while the latter refers to groups, institutions, organizations, political systems etcetera (Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D., & Hamilton, H. Ehernberger 2003). According to van Dijk Critical Discourse Analysis is primarily used to study the relationships of power and dominance at a global level, but when doing so it actually studies discourse at a micro level as it are individuals and their ideologies, attitudes and knowledge which form these groups or organizations (Wodak & Meyer 2001).

The final approach belongs to probably one of the most cited researchers of CDA, Ruth Wodak, and is called the "discourse-historical method". Wodak's approach is interdisciplinary, in other words, she strongly suggests not using just CDA, but combining it with other methods or theories. According to her, an interdisciplinary approach is important to clarify the complex relationship between discourse and society as well as the way in which those two influence each other (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Besides the interdisciplinary approach, Wodak also focusses on a historical analysis, meaning she studies the historical background of the social environment in which a certain discourse appears (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Briefly worded, according to Wodak the discourse-historical approach attempts "to work with different approaches […] and on the basis of a variety of empirical data as well as background information" (Wodak & Meyer 2001. 65). This approach was initially used for a research on the anti-Semitic stereotyped image and later on it was used in a study on racist discrimination and in another one on nation and national identity. (Wodak & Meyer 2001). The discourse-historical method of Wodak is rather a pragmatic approach to CDA, meaning it does not spend a lot of time on a complex theory but rather explains it through a specific social problem (in the case of CDA one of discrimination, bias, power abuse, etc. or like the ones in the studies mentioned above) and intends to find so called conceptual tools to analyse such problems (Wodak & Meyer 2001; Wodak & Meyer 2009). Wodak's approach to CDA is three-dimensional, the analysis happens in three stages. These will be discussed in more detail in the next paragraph. During the first stage of the analysis the content of the discourse is analysed and signs of power abuse or racist or biased language are marked (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Next, the discursive strategies are studied. These strategies refer to the ways in which language is used to introduce in a discourse what was marked in the previous stage that is certain ideas or ideologies. Examples of such strategies are nomination, how people are referred to, or predication, what characteristics people are associated with (Wodak & Meyer 2001). In the third and final stage, the meaning or the objective of such discursive strategies is analysed as well as the linguistic aspects that contribute to those strategies. For example, nomination, how people are referred to, is called the strategy, the objective is to create the notion of 'us' versus 'them' or the notion of in-groups and out-groups, the linguistic tools to

BDD-A28617 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:10 UTC)

create this strategy and objective are, for example, negatively connoted metaphors or generalizations (Wodak & Meyer 2001).

Wodak's approach can be summarized in certain steps. She emphasizes researchers should first gather information on the social environment as well as background information. Then, they should form research questions relevant for the social problem or phenomena being studied and think about other theories or methods that might be used besides CDA (interdisciplinary approach) to answer these questions (Wodak & Meyer 2001). Next is the analysis of the three stages mentioned in the previous paragraph, categorizing the discursive strategies and examining what they mean or what they are intended for. After this analysis Wodak suggests drawing up a diagram containing the topics of a specific text (what is being talked about in a text) so researchers can get a clear view of the, if present, personal opinion or ideologies of the author. The final step would be to interpret these results while linking them to the research questions and social problem (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

Analysis and findings

After having discussed three of the most cited approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis and having clarified the overall goal or objective of CDA, the research in this paper will be primarily leaning on the approach of Norman Fairclough and that of Ruth Wodak. These theories provide ways of analysing the corpus, British newspaper articles and editorials on Great Britain exit from European Union, efficiently and in-depth. The textual analysis described in the paragraph of Fairclough's approach can be used to detect ideological or biased language in the articles. The discursive strategies of Ruth Wodak can be used then to examine the meaning of such ideological language. Just as Wodak's approach suggests, this paper will be giving a historical background on the British Accession and the context of the Brexit and on the period in which the newspaper articles were written (The Referendum 2016) as well as information on the social context, meaning information on the role of journalism in today's society and on the British print press media system.

Research on how the EU has been reported in the press has been unequivocal. Outside the *Independent,Guardian* and *Mirror* press reporting has been relentlessly hostile to the EU. However, research shows that broadcast media has failed to offer a counter-point. Broadcast reporting has tended to dominated by summits, disputes between the EU and UK or domestic political conflict. This has meant that when the EU is reported it tends to be framed as being in a conflictual rather than collaborative relationship with the UK. Furthermore, since most broadcast reporting is dominated by the main two parties - and Eurosceptic Tories have been more vocal than Europhile Labour MPs, audiences have been more exposed to arguments against the EU than those in favour.

It appears that *The Guardian* published the greatest number of referendum-related articles during the campaign, as a supporter of the "Britain stronger in Europe". *The Daily Expres*s published the second highest number and supported the Leave campaign. *The Sun*, one of the most trustful tabloids which had, until March 2018, the largest circulation of any daily newspaper in the United Kingdom, also advocated for leaving the EU .

The Sun, in its June 22 editorial, *Look into His Eyes: Beleave in Britain*, takes issue with Cameron's claim that he could reform the EU, making explicit to readers that it will never reform (line 11). Much like *The Mail*, there is a demonising of Brussels and the notion that a super state will undermine the sovereignty of Britain: "They will ignore the increasing protests of voters here and across the continent and forge ahead with their 16 long-held dream of a single EU super state..." (Lines 15-16), *The Sun* states at the outset that Cameron knew he could: "never control immigration while in the EU. Yet he shamefully continued promising voters he could…..meanwhile mobs of illegal migrants force themselves aboard UK-bound lorries." (lines 5-7). Again the discourse of ellipsis is such that voters are

BDD-A28617 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:10 UTC)

persuaded to vote Leave, but the tone is shrill. It can be seen how some could be convinced of the need for further collective action. (Keith and Lundberg, 2008: 5), *TheMirror's* June 22 editorial, which starts: *For the sake of our great nation's future*, avoids argumentation but declares to readers that if they want to carry on trading with the EU, they will "almost certainly have to accept freedom of movement" (line 57), citing non-EU Norway and Switzerland, as examples. *The Mail* utilised argumentation to convince and persuade readers, often based on misinformation or without substantiation. Instead *TheMirror* counters such attempts "we are kidding ourselves" (line 61) in thinking the UK could get preferential terms, instead "being lumbered with the worst of all worlds, having to accept EU migrants but with no say at the top table" (Lines 62-3) presenting the facts (Ashworth-Hayes, April, 2016, BBC Reality Check, June,2016). *The Guardian* (2016, June 21), dedicated its front page news front, *Cameron: Brexiters stoking intolerance*, to an interview with then prime minister, David Cameron. What is however noticeable from the piece, is that Cameron accused the Brexiters of "stoking intolerance and division with extreme warnings on immigration" (lines 1-2). On this he was right. (Lyons, 2016, BBC, July, 2016). Cameron went on to accuse Farage of scapegoating people, after unveiling a poster of refugees fleeing to Slovenia (lines 213). *The Guardian* editorial on June 20, is a direct challenge to some of the core notions presented in other mainstream newspapers, regarding Brexit. The newspaper is very clear in describing the focus on immigration as often of a xenophobic nature, admitting to the EU's shortcomings, challenging the inward looking approach of the Leave campaign. The piece challenges its readership at the outset, countering the rapport (Mautner, 2008) of the Mail and Telegraph, with its own: "Are we one member in a family of nations, or a country that prefers to keep itself to itself and bolt the door?"(Line 2) The editorial picks up on how immigration became the central issue. It warned that the referendum risked: "descending into a plebiscite on whether immigrants are a good or a bad thing. To see what is at stake, just consider the dark forces that could so easily become emboldened by a narrow insistence on putting the indigenous first." (lines 7-9). *The Guardian* referred to "the must unrelenting, unbalanced and sometimes xenophobic press assault in history" (Line 10). *The Guardian* also highlighted the contradiction between Leave campaigners professing to be pro-immigration, while "fearmongering" (line 12) over possible Turkish accession.

The Daily Mail and *The Sun*, constructed in the main an unsubstantiated yet no less compelling common sense argumentation around the common market, which set a context for initial discourses of ellipsis, with the public persuaded for the need for collective action, despite the lack of evidence provided. These discourses constructed an initial false economic premise for opposition to the EU, but one that created a platform for the more emotive argumentation of subsequent discourse over immigration and further persuasive calls for action with again a lack of substantiation, hence further discourses of ellipsis. *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* in their editorials sought to compel readers to reach various conclusions, closing down rational debate through the use of extensive emotive rhetoric, short on facts.

The use of language, as used by some of the newspaper before and after the EU referendum, may have posed a threat to democracy; but in pandering to people's emotional responses, rather than seriously holding politicians to account, as many arguably did, it is feeding the celebrity notion of journalism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fairclough, Norman. "*Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*", Pearson education Limited, 1995
- Fairclough, Norman. *"Media Discourse"*, London, Edward Arnold, 1995

BDD-A28617 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:10 UTC)

- Chouliaraki, Lilie and Fairclough, Norman. "*Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis (Critical Discourse Analysis EUP)".* Edinburg, UK: Edinburg University Press, 1999
- Fairclough, Norman. *"Analysing Discourse. Textual analysis for Social Research". London, Routledge, 2003*
- Fairclough, Isabela and Fairclough,Norman *"Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students"*. New York, Routledge, 2012
- Wodak, Ruth and Meyer, Michael. *"Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis".* London, Sage Publications, 2001.
- Wodak, Ruth. "*The Discourse of Politics in Action: politics as usual".* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009
- Wodak, Ruth. *"The Politics of Fear. What a Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean".* London, Sage Publications, 2015
- Van Dijk, Teun. *"Discourse as Social Interaction"*. London, Sage Publications, 1997
- Van Dijk, Teun. *"Discourse and Knowledge".* Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Richardson, John E. *"Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis".* London, Macmillan International Higher Education, 2007.

BDD-A28617 © 2018 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:06:10 UTC)