



Boris Johnson's Narrative of the 2016 Brexit Referendum: A Counter-discourse on the European Union

Fathi Bourmèche

1. Introduction

The Brexit referendum in June 2016, the result of which put an end to a long relationship between two partners, represented a historic moment both for Britain and the European Union (EU). Such a split would possibly have long-term impacts on these two partners in many respects. Farrell and Goldsmith (2017), in *How to Lose a Referendum: The Definitive Story of Why the UK Voted for Brexit*, covered the event by highlighting the reasons behind Britain's decision to leave the EU. They provided a historical account of Britain's relationship with Europe as from the inception of the European community to Nigel Farage's rhetoric about the EU. Farrell and Goldsmith (2017) focused on a number of interviews with various figures who played significant roles during the Brexit referendum, including Farage, offering a deeper insight into Britain's split from the EU.

Sobolewska's and Ford's (2020) *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*, for instance, covered the event by focusing on the deep causes of such a split. They were interested in the 1960s and 1970s, two decades known for division over Britain's membership, particularly in terms of British identity. In Sobolewska's and Ford's (2020) views, seeds of the split were nurtured during these decades rather than grown by right-wing politicians. In other words, Brexit did not create a divided nation, as the division was there long before the referendum. Such a division was particularly based on controversies over the issues of identity and immigration.

The paper is an attempt to contribute to the existing literature on Brexit and related themes, covering the whole issue from Johnson's perspective. Knight (2019) reported that Johnson started his career as a journalist, first for the *Times* of London and then moved to Brussels to work for the *Telegraph*, churning out "sly, exaggerated stories that cast the European project as bureaucratically insane"; he soon turned into "a darling of the Conservative Party's Euroskeptic right" and gained popularity among British people (Knight 2019: n. p.). de Bourdon-Parme (2021) confirmed such a popularity, arguing that Johnson has remained a popular politician in the minds of the public for about thirty years. Ironically, during the Brexit negotiations, it was reported that Johnson, "a journalist-turned-politician" came back "to the scene of his youthful journalistic escapades [...] in search of a trade agreement with the European bureau-

crats he once mocked" (Landler and Castle 2020: n. p.). From this perspective, the main objective of the current study is to delve into Johnson's narrative in the hope of gaining a better understanding of the role he played, particularly during the Brexit campaign and in its aftermath.

Attention is paid to Johnson's discourse in relation to his attitudes towards the EU, presumably favouring the British national identity over the EU's. The study, therefore, seeks to answer two research questions. The first one is "What are the main features of Johnson's discourse during and in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum?" Answering this question would offer a better insight into Johnson's role during the event and in its aftermath. The second question is "What is the potential impact of such a rhetoric on Britain's status on the international scene?" The intention is to gain a better insight into Johnson's discourse and its impact on Britain as well as Europe.

2. Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical framework adopted in this study is Political Discourse Analysis (PDA), based on Samuel Obeng's (1997) model and Fairclough's and Fairclough's (2012) practical reasoning framework. Political discourse has been the concern of a number of scholars, including Paul Chilton (2004), offering a thorough study on the subject in his *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*. Obeng (1997) was concerned with this area, with particular focus on the indirectness strategies followed by many politicians given the tricky and risky nature of politics, as well as the power of the spoken word (Obeng 1997: 58). Speech "is like an egg: when dropped it shatters"; politicians must therefore use all the verbal strategies at their disposal to protect and maintain their political interests, careers and their faces from being "marred or defiled" (quoted in Obeng 1997: 52).

Some of the indirectness strategies are metaphor, circumlocution, innuendo, proverbs and evasion. Circumlocution is the use of an unnecessary large number of words to express an idea; innuendo "refers to an oblique allusion or an insinuation involving a veiled reflection on an interactant's character or reputation" (Obeng 1997: 56). In Obeng's (1997) view, evasion is conveyed through eight strategies. The first one is giving up on words. The second one is engaging in circumlocution. The third strategy is engaging in a tricky deception. The fourth strategy is stating one's refusal to talk. The fifth strategy is changing the topic of discourse. The sixth one is flouting the maxim of relevance by providing irrelevant responses¹. The seventh strategy is in the case of Wh-questions, the speaker provides answers that cannot be delimited in terms of the set of options by the propositional organisation of the question. The eighth strategy is providing answers that cannot be located on the positive/negative continuum for yes/no questions.

¹ Grice's four maxims of conversation are quantity, quality, relevance and manner. Quantity is when someone makes his/her contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange; quality is when s/he says what is true; relevance is when s/he makes his contribution in a discourse relevant; manner is when s/he is brief and orderly and neither obscure nor ambiguous (Obeng 1997: 50).

The second theoretical tool, Fairclough's and Fairclough's (2012) practical reasoning, has been developed as a "response to practical problems which are addressed to us as agents who are acting in particular circumstances and aiming to achieve various goals" (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012: 35). Such a frame is a conductive argument which involves "the weighing of pros and cons of various considerations that are thought to have a bearing on the claim, and the conclusion is drawn 'on balance'" (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012: 38). The structure of practical reasoning, for Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), consists in five interconnected components:

- 1) Claim for Action (A)
- 2) Goal (G)
- 3) Values (V)
- 4) Circumstances (C)
- 5) Means-Goal (M-G)

Claim for Action (A), suggests that the agent should presumably do A. As for Goal (G), the agent's goal is a future state of affairs (G) in which the agent's actual concerns or value commitments are realised. The agent would be concerned with the realisation of Value (V), or that he should be concerned with the realisation of V. In this sense, V designates the agent's actual concerns or the agent's value commitments. Some of these commitments could be duties, promises, socially recognised (moral) values and norms. For Circumstances (C), the agent's context of action is composed of two relevant facts: a) natural facts; b) social, institutional facts. As for Means-Goal (M-G), action A is the means that will presumably take the agent from C to G in accordance with V. This structure is relevant to the analysis of Johnson's discourse, given that practical reasoning would offer a better understanding of the main arguments used by one of the main leaders in the Leave camp, particularly in terms of his claims and goals.

The aim of this study is to carry out a thematic analysis of Johnson's discourse, highlighting the main indirectness strategies used in his speeches as well as the different arguments. The intention is to gain a better insight into Johnson's rhetoric about the EU during and in the aftermath of the Brexit campaign. The intention is basically to test the validity of Obeng's (1997) and Fairclough's and Fairclough's (2012) frameworks on Johnson's discourse on the EU through his two speeches pertaining to Brexit. Attention is paid to his verbal strategies, metaphors and circumlocution as a case study. Similarly, attention is paid to the different claims for action and the supporting arguments, including Johnson's goals and considerations.

The corpus of the study consists in two speeches delivered by Johnson in two different occasions related to Brexit. The first speech was delivered during the Brexit referendum on 9 May 2016, downloaded from the official website of the Conservative party. It is a long speech, counting 5252 words, in which Johnson tried to convince British citizens to cast their vote on 23 June 2016, emphasising the EU's lack of competitiveness and remoteness from voters, claiming that it has been moving in

the wrong direction. The second speech was delivered in the aftermath of the Brexit result on 24 June 2016, downloaded from the official website of the *Telegraph*. It is a relatively short speech, counting 800 words, in which Johnson congratulated British voters for leaving the EU and paid tribute to David Cameron, the incumbent British Prime Minister after his resignation. The significance of such speeches lies in the way Johnson handled the issue, emphasising Britain's role on the international scene as well as its role in Europe. Equally important, Johnson highlighted the main feature of his country, namely parliamentary democracy. Attention is paid to Johnson's indirectness strategies used throughout his speeches, namely metaphors and circumlocution as well as his claims for action and goals.

3. Review of the Existing Literature

Brexit has generated a bulk of research conducted by a number of scholars, covering the referendum and related themes from different angles and perspectives. For example, Evans and Menon (2017), in *Brexit and British Politics*, covered the event with particular attention to the main reasons behind the referendum results and its implications for British politics. Evans and Menon (2017) were mainly interested in the campaign and people's attitudes towards the EU. They concluded that not many people changed their minds about the EU over a long period of time, from 2012 to 2016, implying that opinions pertaining to identity were usually stable. It was also pointed out that the Leave camp managed to convince a large number of British people to cast their vote, including 2.8 million voters who could not vote in the 2015 general election. In their view, Brexit has had a major impact on British politics, shattering, in particular, the existing equilibrium between the two major parties, namely the Conservatives and Labour.

In *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe*, Staiger and Martill (2018) were interested in the repercussions of Brexit on both Britain and the EU. A section entitled "How British was the Brexit Vote?" was particularly linked to Britain's stance on the whole idea of the EU. Brexit was viewed as a vindication of Charles de Gaulle's veto back in 1963, refusing Britain's membership to the European Economic Community (EEC)². Staiger and Martill (2018) were also concerned with the impact of Brexit on the Eurozone, considering the event as an iceberg, "merely the visible portion of a much larger and more powerful mass below the surface" (2018: 132). In other words, the event could be a bad omen for EU integration, possibly paving the way for more frictions within such an institution in the aftermath of Brexit.

Adam (2020), in *Brexit: Causes and Consequences*, also covered the event by throwing more light on the main reasons and outcome of the split between two partners, namely Britain and the EU. Adam (2020) pointed out that holding a referendum on Britain's EU membership without any predetermined plan to replace such a membership was meaningless³. Indeed, the absence of such a plan was obvious in

² For more details on this point, see Staiger and Martill (2018: 47).

³ For more details on this point, see Adam (2020: 297).

the aftermath of Brexit when Brexiteers, including Johnson, were hidden for a while from the eyes of journalists and the public, presumably for the absence of any measures to move forward after Britain's exit.

In *Brexit and Liberal Democracy: Populism, Sovereignty, and the Nation-State*, Ali (2022) was also concerned with Brexit, paying particular attention to the broader context of the constant rise of nationalism, yielding great support for right-wing parties and politicians. Ali's (2022) main argument is that Brexit is one of the crucial events which could be insightful about the global political trends, particularly in relation to nationalist movements around the world. In view of this, the current study is an endeavour to contribute to the existing literature on the subject, with particular attention to Johnson's discourse on the EU and its implications on Britain as well as the EU.

The aim is to gain a better understanding of the event from Johnson's lenses on the grounds that he emerged as one of the most prominent politicians in Britain, expected as Cameron's successor, following the latter's resignation as prime minister soon after the referendum. The paper is meant to validate some of the main arguments and conclusions put forward by a number of the aforementioned scholars. Firstly, it aims at confirming Evans' and Menon's (2017) argument on Britons' stance on the EU in terms of their sovereignty and British national identity, a key issue in Johnson's discourse as developed later. In the same vein, it seeks to confirm Ali's (2022) idea on Brexit and nationalism, focusing on Johnson's rhetoric on the EU and its repercussion on Britons' sense of belonging. Secondly, the paper seeks to validate Adam's (2020) view in relation to the mess and uncertainty created by Brexit, knowing that Brexit has had a major impact on both Britain and the EU, leading to instability, as manifested in the two snap elections in Britain, one in 2017 called by Theresa May and the other in 2019 called by Johnson.

4. Findings

A close examination of the corpus revealed that Johnson's discourse on the EU included recurrent accusations of the Remain camp, along with his pledge to regain Britain's sovereignty from an obsolete institution. In this sense, Johnson's discourse was centred around two main interconnected themes, using metaphors and circumlocution, in addition to a number of claims and goals, particularly in his first speech during the Brexit campaign. This is evidence that Johnson's narrative correlated with some aspects of Obeng's (1997) and Fairclough's and Fairclough's (2012) frameworks. Table 1 below illustrates such a correlation through some examples of Obeng's (1997) indirectness strategies, namely metaphor and circumlocution; table 2 provides some examples of correlation between Johnson's narrative and Fairclough's and Fairclough's (2012) claims and goals.

Table 1: Obeng's Indirectness Strategies and Johnson's Discourse

Obeng's Indirectness Strategies	Johnson's Discourse
Metaphor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a <i>vast pantomime horse</i>, with 28 people blindly pulling in different directions (Speech one) • to keep insisting that the EU is about economics is like saying the <i>Italian Mafia is interested in olive oil and real estate</i> (Speech one) • The EU system is a <i>ratchet hauling us</i> ever further into a federal structure (Speech one).
Circumlocution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To call this a reformed EU is an offence [...] We have proved to ourselves [...] that we cannot change the direction. [...] We cannot interrupt the steady erosion of democracy, [...] it is time to tell our friends and partners [...] that we wish to forge a new relationship based on free trade and intergovernmental cooperation (Speech one). • The most important mistake is [...] that there is some effective and sensible trade-off between the loss of democratic control and greater economic prosperity. [...] This is turning out to be simply false. The loss of democratic control is spiritually damaging, [...] What the government wants is [...] to remain locked into the Single Market law-making regime, and to be exposed to 2500 new EU regulations a year (Speech one).

Table 2: Fairclough's and Fairclough's practical reasoning and Johnson's Discourse

Fairclough's and Fairclough's practical reasoning	Johnson's Discourse
Claims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remainers' campaign is a myth (Speech one); • ...the EU lacks competitiveness and is remote from voters (Speech one); • EU...too opaque and not accountable enough to the people it is meant to serve (Speech two).
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Britain will continue to be a great European power (Speech two); • find its voice in the world again (Speech two)

Johnson's first theme is Remainers' myths on Britain's benefits as an EU member state, claiming in his first speech that Cameron's camp was dishonest on the grounds that they betrayed British voters by insisting on their being stronger in the EU. Johnson's goal was therefore to convince voters not to trust Remainers in order to convince them to leave the EU. The second theme, a focal point in Johnson's second speech, is his claim that Brexit means Britain's independence from a failed and anti-democratic project, promising to regain British sovereignty from Brussels. His goal was that Britain would regain the role she used to play on the international scene.

4.1 Remainers' myths on Britain's benefits within the EU

Johnson accused Cameron of failing to put further pressure to reform such an obsolete institution, claiming that the prime minister and his team based their campaign on several myths. In his first speech, Johnson expressed his strong Euroscepticism, given that the EU had been evolving in the same direction, which resulted in questioning its anti-democratic absurdities for decades. He argued that the EU deviated from its original purpose, forming an economic community seeking to strengthen member states. He expressed his excitement about Cameron's 2013 Bloomberg speech, campaigning for substantial reforms within the EU, including real changes to free mobility. But he was disappointed for seeing no reforms taking place in the EU. Indeed, he likened negotiations on behalf of the EU to "trying to ride a vast

pantomime horse, with 28 people blindly pulling in different directions” (Speech one).

Thus, Johnson was satisfied with Cameron’s savaging the EU’s “lack of competitiveness, its remoteness from the voters, its relentless movement in the wrong direction” (Speech one), praising him, in his second speech, as a distinguished politician in modern Britain. Firstly, he considered Cameron as an extraordinary and brave politician who managed to secure successive victories for the Conservative party. Secondly, he paid tribute to such a figure for his style of leadership to the party as well as the country, making the British economy one of the most dynamic ones in the EU. Johnson also gave credit to Cameron for his bravery to call for the Brexit referendum, exposing British voters to one of the toughest questions, thanking them in his second speech for their choice to leave such an obsolete institution.

Such a referendum was metaphorically likened to a door which “has magically opened” in Britons’ lives. Johnson claimed, in his second speech, that Brexit would neither mean that Britain would be less united nor less European, arguing that there was no hurry in invoking Article 50⁴. The implication is that the Leave camp was not eager to speed up the withdrawal process, seemingly because of lack of any plan for a Brexit deal. With the benefit of hindsight, Brexit negotiations appeared to be tough, taking longer time than expected and resulting in a heated debate over the kind of deal that would suit the two parties and a deep division within the Conservative party. Yet, Johnson reassured Britons in his second speech that their country would remain a great European power, participating in crucial debates on defence and foreign policy to secure safety around the world.

Johnson’s narrative was also focused on Cameron’s reiteration of the idea that Britain would be stronger and safer in the EU. However, Johnson debunked such an idea by claiming that the Remain camp’s discourse was based on myths. Cameron’s claim that Britain’s political dependence on the EU was compensated by economic benefits was seen as a myth by Johnson. He considered Remainers’ acceptance of a democratic cost at the expense of economic benefit as a false argument, given that 60 per cent of British laws were made in Brussels.

What is more, Johnson claimed that losing democratic control was spiritually damaging and socially risky for Britain, arguing that its benefits, when abiding by the thousands of EU regulations of the single market instead of merely having access to it, were very difficult to detect. His goal was therefore that Britain would be released from the “politically-driven empire” of EU laws. His aim was to make his country join many other countries enjoying free-trade access to the Single Market without being chained by such laws. To illustrate his point, Johnson drew a parallel between two different periods of time: 1973-1992 and 1992-2012, arguing that the creation of the Single Market in 1992 proved to be a failure to the British economy, quoting Michael Burrage, a renowned economist. The latter pointed out that the rate of growth decreased in that British exports of goods were 22 per cent lower than the twenty-year period prior to the creation of the Single Market, *i.e.* 1973-1992.

⁴ For more details on Article 50 pertaining to the withdrawal of any member state from the EU, see [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/659349/EPRS_IDA\(2020\)659349_FR.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/659349/EPRS_IDA(2020)659349_FR.pdf).

Furthermore, Johnson metaphorically pointed out that by joining the Single Market, the expectations were that goods “would start ping-pong around the EEC as if in some supercharged cyclotron”; however, the rate of growth emerged 14.6 per cent lower than the pre-market period, namely 1973-1992 (Speech one). From this perspective, Johnson wondered about the benefits of remaining within the EU, abiding by a large number of one-size-fits-all regulations. He argued that 27 non-EU countries outside this market were doing much better than Britain in relation to their exports of goods to the EU. Indeed, Johnson was embarrassed by highlighting the fact that 21 of these countries did much better than Britain in exporting services to 11 EEC countries, presumably prior to the creation of the Single Market.

Johnson also argued that the EU was a failure compared to non-EU countries, pointing out that the OECD was doing better in the aftermath of the creation of the Single Market in terms of economic growth. He described the EU as a “microclimate of scandalously high unemployment” (Speech one), refuting again Cameron’s idea of Britain’s economic benefits as an EU member state. He pointed out that in 2016 the Eurozone was projected to grow by 1.5 per cent, compared to the US by 2.4 per cent, China by 6.5 per cent, New Zealand by 2 per cent and India by 7.5 per cent. This is evidence, in Johnson’s view, that promises of prosperity under the Single Market were mere frauds. He also added that the Eurozone did not include any single university among the top ten, lagging behind the US in the tech revolution.

Equally important, Johnson debunked the idea prophesied by Remainers that London, when failing to join the Eurozone, would lose its status as a financial hub, pushing banks to flee to Frankfurt. Johnson, stated, however, that Canary Wharf, London’s thriving urban hub, was “growing relentlessly” ever since the 2008 financial and economic downturn; indeed, it was much bigger than the Frankfurt financial centre. Furthermore, Cameron’s “peace-in-Europe argument” was also debunked by Johnson. Johnson did not accept Cameron’s association of the EU with 70 years of stability, ridiculing his idea that remaining part of such an institution would prevent German tanks from crossing the French border. In the same vein, Johnson disagreed with the Remainers’ idea that leaving the EU would label people as anti-European. Such a claim would make the Remain camp, in Johnson’s view, have a monopoly on liberal cosmopolitanism.

4.2 Brexit: Britain’s independence from a failed and anti-democratic project

In Johnson’s view, the Brexit referendum would be an opportunity that British voters should seize to be relieved from the burden of the EU, *i.e.* getting independence from a failed and anti-democratic project. Britons’ decision to leave the EU, according to Johnson, meant that British voters would choose “to take back control from a EU that has become too opaque and not accountable enough to the people it is meant to serve” (Speech two). In the same vein, Johnson argued that in the twenty-first century Britain does not necessarily need to be “part of a federal government in Brussels that is imitated nowhere else on Earth” (Speech one). In other words, the EU

seems to be an institution which could not cope with the different ongoing world changes, accusing it of its failure to keep the initial economic bloc, moving instead to a political community. Such a claim was backed by Johnson's metaphor, stating that the EU "system is a ratchet hauling us ever further into a federal structure" (Speech one). Johnson's use of the word ratchet is quite significant, equating the EU to a wheel or bar with teeth along the edge and a metal piece that fits between the teeth, allowing movement in one direction only. The implication is that such an institution is a failure, having been moving in one direction and not being able to modernise itself and adjust to modern time.

Johnson pointed out that the Leave camp includes people like David Owen, Gisela Stuart, Nigel Lawson and John Longworth, who "love Europe and who feel at home on the continent, but whose attitudes towards the project of European Union have been hardening over time" (Speech one). Such attitudes prove that the EU project has not appealed to a large number of people. In other words, it has increased Euroscepticism in Britain among the two major parties, namely Labour and the Conservatives. This is why Johnson urged British voters in the same speech to seize the opportunity and "take this once in a lifetime chance to walk through that door," *i.e.* leaving the EU. Johnson used another metaphor to convince voters that the EU has been moving in the wrong direction. For him, "to keep insisting that the EU is about economics is like saying the Italian Mafia is interested in olive oil and real estate" (Speech one).

Moreover, Johnson believed that the EU "has undergone a spectacular metamorphosis [...], and the crucial point is that it is still becoming ever more centralizing, interfering and anti-democratic" (Speech one). Such a narrative implies that Johnson and a significant number of Eurosceptic politicians in Britain were not satisfied with the fact that the EU has monopolised power in Brussels, presumably depriving its member states from having a say, one of the main tenets of democratic practices. Johnson also emphasised the idea that the EU has the power to fix rates of indirect taxes across all its 28 member states. What is more, the EU is in full control of monetary policy in 19 countries in the Eurozone. According to Johnson, the Euro was disastrous for some member states, knowing that Britain accepted neither to join the Eurozone nor the Schengen Treaty as a member state.

Equally important, Johnson reiterated the EU's power monopoly by highlighting the fact that the list of Lisbon competences included 45 new fields of policy where Britain could be outvoted by a qualified majority. In the same vein, Johnson claimed that the House of Commons Library repeatedly confirmed that the EU was generating 60 per cent of the laws passed through British Parliament when primary and secondary legislations were combined. In Johnson's view, such a monopoly was a major hindrance of democratic practices in Britain, arguing that it was "this erosion of democracy – that" brought him into the Brexit campaign (Speech one).

Another major aspect of the EU's failure is the crisis of mass migration, affecting a large number of member states and harming their budget as well as their social makeup. There is no doubt that one of the key issues raised by Brexiteers during their

campaign to leave the EU is mass EU migration, particularly resulting from the unexpected influx of Eastern Europeans in the aftermath of the fifth EU enlargement. The first wave was put into effect in May 2004, adding 8 countries from Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Latvia and Estonia, in addition to Malta and Cyprus. The second wave took place in January 2007, adding two countries, Bulgaria and Romania. Indeed, controversy over such an influx into Britain seemed to be one of the major key issues raised by the Leave camp to convince voters to leave the EU. The assumption is that Brexit would relieve Britain of the burden of free mobility within the EU, including free movement of people⁵.

Johnson claimed that he was for immigration, but it should be controlled, echoing Cameron's argument on the same issue. However, Johnson was upset by the fact that power was in the hands of Brussels, deciding who would have the right to live and work in Britain. Johnson contended that it was not possible to persuade voters of cutting immigration to the tens of thousands, with reference to Cameron's promise in the Conservatives' manifestos as from 2010. It should be remembered that Cameron kept reiterating such a promise despite the fact that it proved implausible, given the nature of EU migration, that of Eastern Europeans, in particular, which was higher than expected and out of control. In fact, EU migrants and Eastern Europeans, in particular, were then EU nationals whose rights were enshrined in EU laws, including their free movement to settle in any member state, enjoying their rights as full EU citizens. Johnson seemed to be aware of the dilemma of controlling EU migration, implying that Brexit would put an end to this right enjoyed by EU nationals in Britain. Johnson argued that:

It is deeply corrosive of popular trust in democracy that [...] politicians tell [...] that they can cut immigration to the tens of thousands – and then find that they miss their targets by hundreds of thousands, so that we add a population the size of Newcastle every year, with all the extra and unfunded pressure that puts on the NHS [National Health service] and other public services⁶ (Speech one).

Johnson's discourse was mainly focused on his pledge to regain British sovereignty, presumably taken by Brussels, as well as its role in the world. In Johnson's view, leaving the EU means Britain's independence, reiterating Farage's argument throughout the campaign and in its aftermath⁷. He pointed out that such a claim was also behind his joining the Leave camp, knowing that he had been one of Cameron's close friends and member of his cabinet. Johnson's sense of Britishness seemed much stronger than his allegiance to the EU. This is illustrated by the following statement:

Do our hearts pitter-patter as we watch it [the EU flag] flutter over public buildings? On the contrary. The British share with other EU populations a growing sense of alienation, which is one of the reasons turn-out at European elections continues to decline (Speech one).

⁵ For details on EU migration and free mobility within the EU, see Bourmeche (2020a); Bourmeche (2020b).

⁶ For more on this point, see, for instance, Bourmeche (2018), the section entitled "Eastern Europeans: a burden on British public services" (203-205).

⁷ For more details on Farage's claim, see Bourmeche (2023), particularly the section entitled "Farage: A nationalist leader claiming Brexit as Independence Day for Britain" (144-146).

Obviously, the aforementioned statement revealed that Johnson seemed a Eurosceptic politician who shared a sense of alienation with other European politicians such as Marine Le Pen in France or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, by belonging to the EU club. He therefore urged young Britons to leave the EU in the hope of securing a more prosperous future after taking back control from such a failed and anti-democratic institution. The assumption is that taking back control from the EU would be the foundation of Britain's economic prosperity. Johnson also claimed that Britain's exit would allow the British government to pass laws and set taxes in accordance with the country's needs rather than the EU's. It would similarly allow Britain to regain control of its borders, taking "the wind out of the sails of the extremists and those who would play politics with immigration" (Speech two).

Brexit result, for Johnson, meant that British voters had spoken for democracy not only in Britain but also across Europe, claiming that they should be proud of such a result. Britain's exit would help the country regain its position on the international scene. Johnson claimed that, by splitting from the EU, Britain, representing the fifth biggest economy on the planet, would find its voice again in the world. He particularly claimed that Britain would be once again a powerful, "liberal, humane, [and] an extraordinary force for good", giving credit to his country for endowing the world with the idea of parliamentary democracy (Speech two).

Nevertheless, Johnson insisted that Brexit would not necessarily mean that British people would turn their back on Europe, claiming that they are part of Europe. He contended that their children and grandchildren would

continue to have a wonderful future as Europeans, travelling to the continent, understanding the languages and the cultures that make up our common European civilization, continuing to interact with the peoples of other countries in a way that is open and friendly and outward looking (Speech two).

The implication is that Johnson was against the EU rather than Europe. This could also be the attitude of other Eurosceptic politicians, including Farage, currently Reform UK leader.

5. Discussion

Findings of this paper could be significant in relation to the existing literature on Brexit and related themes. A close examination of Johnson's narrative revealed that his arguments were based on two major themes. The first one was his accusation of Cameron and the Remain camp as a whole to propagate a number of myths during the Brexit campaign in the hope of persuading British voters to remain in the EU. The second theme was Johnson's claim that Brexit means Britain's independence from a failed and anti-democratic project, promising Britons to regain British sovereignty, thus reviving its position as a major world power on the international scene. Such a claim resonated with Farage's reiterated during the Brexit campaign and in its aftermath. In this sense, Johnson's narrative seemed to have had a major impact on Britons' choice to leave the EU, presumably gaining their independence and re-establishing their status as a world power.

Thus, the study validated Evans's and Menon's (2017) statement on Britons' attitudes towards the EU, preferring their independence and sovereignty instead of remaining bound to EU laws and regulations. What is noteworthy is that Johnson alluded to some historical facts about Britain's membership to the EEC back in 1973. The implication is that Britain had been considered as a reluctant European in the sense that it had always prioritised its ties with the US and the Commonwealth rather than the European community. Johnson particularly expressed his dissatisfaction with the way the EU developed and monopolised power at the expense of its member states. In other words, EU identity and integration was much more important than national identities. Johnson's discourse seemed consistent with Evans's and Menon's (2017) idea that Britons have always favoured their Britishness over EU identity.

In the same vein, the study confirmed Ali's (2022) association of Brexit with nationalism. Johnson's discourse seemed similar to other right-wing populist politicians such as Farage and Marine Le Pen in that they insisted that the EU institution was no longer congruent with the twenty-first century. Indeed, Johnson reiterated throughout his speeches that the EU was an obsolete institution which no longer fits its member states, possibly predicting more frictions and splits in the near future. Similarly, the study validated Adam's (2020) argument in relation to the impact of Brexit on both Britain and the EU. In the aftermath of Brexit, Britons seemed increasingly proud of their British national identity as reflected in some polls. For example, an Ipsos Mori poll conducted between 26 and 29 July 2016 revealed that 60 per cent of British people preferred to be British citizens rather than the citizens of any other country⁸.

Although Johnson's narrative was particularly focused on a better future for Britain, it seemed that Brexit had a major impact on the two partners, resulting in significant divisions within both Labour and the Conservatives. One aspect of such a division was the series of resignations among Cameron's Cabinet and subsequently two snap elections, one under May and the other under Johnson himself. As for Labour, division was manifest in the contest for leadership and their vision as a separate nation from the EU and the role the country should play as a world power. In relation to the EU, things were more or less similar to Britain as the split seemed to increase calls for more frictions such as Frexit (France's exit) and Nexit (The Netherlands's exit). Significantly, a few weeks prior to Brexit, 69 per cent of Swedes believed that more splits would take place in the future, compared to 66 per cent of Danes, 55 per cent of French and 54 per cent of Germans (Chambers 2016). The implication is that Brexit could be an omen for more and more frictions. Divisions on both sides were clearly stated in the following quote:

The hope that after Brexit the United Kingdom will revert to the self-contained existence of splendid isolation and happy autonomy remains a chimera – just like the other vision that the EU, after getting rid of the eternal spoiler, could finally accomplish the grand design of political union along the lines laid down by Jean Monnet (Adam 2020: 300).

⁸ For further details on this point, see "Six in ten prefer to be British."

In theoretical terms, the study showed a correlation between Johnson's discourse and some aspects of Obeng's (1997) and Fairclough's and Fairclough's (2012) frameworks. Johnson's narrative was characterised by the use of Obeng's (1997) verbal strategies, namely metaphors and circumlocution. It was also based on a number of claims and goals, including Cameron's myths and Johnson's pledge to regain British sovereignty. Obviously, Johnson's oratorical skills seemed to have increased his popularity in Britain to the extent that he was expected to be Cameron's successor. Indeed, he did much better than May, Cameron's successor, particularly in the 2019 snap election, securing a historic landslide majority of 80 seats for the Conservatives. This was obviously explained by his promise to get Brexit done.

Although this study could be an asset to the existing literature on Brexit and its repercussions on both Britain and the EU, it is limited in scope and perspectives. One possible avenue to expand on this study could be achieved by including more of Johnson's speeches over a longer period of time. Another way is to carry out a comparative study between speeches delivered by leaders of the Leave camp and those delivered by the Remain camp, including Cameron. The intention would be to gain a better understanding of the Brexit campaign and the different circumstances around the event as well as the impact of such a historic split between Britain and the EU. Significantly, a recent YouGov survey revealed that 53 per cent of British voters believed that the negatives of Brexit have outweighed the benefits, presumably calling for further research on the subject⁹.

With hindsight, Brexit seemed to have a major impact on the two partners, particularly in terms of economy and security. It was the post-Brexit deal signed in May 2025 between the EU and Britain that seemed to have created some stability and reassurance, particularly for Britain. In the views of Keir Starmer, the current British Prime Minister, such a deal was the third significant agreement between the UK and the EU in the aftermath of Brexit, following his deals with the US and India. He argued that the EU is the largest trading partner with Britain, admitting that Brexit contributed to a 21% decrease in agri-food exports and 7% in agri-food imports. The new deal would allow for the sales of numerous British products within the EU and vice versa, in addition to security measures on the borders to reduce immigration for the two partners. Nick Thomas-Symonds, Minister for EU Relations, contended that the deal marked a new era in EU-British relations, arguing that such a strategic partnership meant that Britain was back on the world stage with a government caring for working people across the country¹⁰. The implication is that Britain and the EU are doomed to be close partners to face various issues, including the upsurge of irregular migration, particularly through the English Channel.

⁹ For more details on the survey, see "Do you think, so far, the benefits of Brexit have outweighed the negatives?"

¹⁰ For more details on the deal, see "PM secures new agreement with EU".

6. Conclusion

The paper argued that Johnson succeeded in persuading British voters to leave the EU. His anti-EU discourse was based on two main arguments. The first one was that Cameron and his Remain camp betrayed British people by propagating a number of myths around Britain's benefits as an EU member state. The second argument was that Brexit meant independence from an obsolete and anti-democratic institution. One of his main promises was that by leaving the EU, Britain would have its sovereignty back, thus regaining its position on the international scene. In this view, the paper implies two major things. Firstly, it demonstrated that Johnson's discourse correlated with some of Obeng's (1997) indirectness strategies and some of Fairclough's and Fairclough's (2012) practical reasoning a great deal. This was particularly obvious in his use of metaphors and circumlocution, along with a number of claims and goals. Secondly, it revealed that Brexit seemed to have impacted the status of Britain as well as the EU. Indeed, in the aftermath of Brexit, Britain seemed to emerge as a world power, particularly by reinforcing its close ties with the US despite uncertainty and division among the two major parties, namely Labour and the Conservatives, particularly in relation to Brexit negotiations. As for the EU, it seemed threatened by more frictions and splits, particularly raised by right-wing politicians, including Marine Le Pen in France.

References

- Adam Rudolf G. (2020) *Brexit: Causes and Consequences*. Switzerland: Springer.
- Ali Amir (2022). *Brexit and Liberal Democracy: Populism, Sovereignty, and the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge.
- Bourmeche Fathi. (2023). "Populism and Discourse: An Analysis of Nigel Farage's speeches following the Brexit Referendum." In: Sadok Damak, Fathi Bourmeche (eds). *Populism and National Identities*. Sfax: CONTACT, 139-155.
- Bourmeche Fathi (2020a). "Brexit and EU Migration on the BBC and CNN: Britishness versus EU identity." In: Margaret D'Siva, Ahmet Atay (eds). *Intercultural communication, identity, and social movements in a digital age*. New York: Routledge, 66-81.
- Bourmeche Fathi (2020b). "Media and free mobility: Framing A10 migrants in the British newspapers from 2004 to 2016." *Romanian Journal of Sociological Studies*. No. 2, 127-139.
- Bourmeche Fathi (2018). "Eastern Europeans in British Press from 2004 to 2014." In: Sai Krishna-Hensel (ed). *Migrants, Refugees and the Media: The New Reality of Open Societies*. London: Routledge, 195-215.
- Chambers Luke (2016, June 2). "Europeans: If Britain leaves others will follow." <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/15552-europe-if-britain-leaves-others-will-follow> Accessed 7 September 2024.
- Chilton Paul (2004). *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- de Bourbon-Parme Tristan (2021). *Boris Johnson: un Européen contrarié*. Paris: François Bourin.
- "Do you think, so far, the benefits of Brexit have outweighed the negatives, or the other way round?" <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/survey-results/daily/2024/06/12/69919/1> Accessed 1 September 2024.
- Evans Geoffrey, Menon Anand (2017). *Brexit and British Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Fairclough Norman, Fairclough Isabela (2012). *Political Discourse Analysis: A Method for Advanced Students*. New York: Routledge.
- Grey Chris (2021). *Brexit Unfolded: How No One Got What They Wanted [And Why They Were Never Going To]*. Hull: Biteback Publishing.
- Knight Sum (2019, June 13). "The Empty Promise of Boris Johnson." *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/06/24/the-empty-promise-of-boris-johnson>. Accessed 4 July 2025.
- Landler Mark, Castle Stephen (2020, December 10). *Boris Johnson Once Mocked the Eurocrats of Brussels. They Haven't Forgotten.* *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/10/world/europe/boris-johnson-brussels-trade-brexit.html>. Accessed 28 June 2025.
- "PM secures new agreement with EU to benefit British people." <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-secures-new-agreement-with-eu-to-benefit-british-people>. Accessed 13 August 2025.
- Obeng Samuel (1997). "Language and politics: indirectness in political discourse." *Discourse and Society* 8/1, 48-83. London: Sage.
- "Six in ten prefer to be British than of any other country on earth." <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/six-ten-prefer-be-british-any-country-earth>. Accessed 7 September 2024.

Speech one (4 May 2016). <https://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2016/05/boris-johnsons-speech-on-the-eu-referendum-full-text.html>. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Speech two (24 June 2016). <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/24/boris-johnson-hails-brexith-victory---full-statement>. Accessed 16 November 2023.

Staiger Uta, Martill Benjamin (eds) (2018). *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe*. London: University College London.

Sobolewska Maria, Robert Ford (2020). *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.