BRITAIN'S STRIVING FOR GREATNESS:
ITS REFLECTION IN LANGUAGE AND POLITICS

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Abstract

This paper is an interdisciplinary study of British political discourse. It attempts to examine how British greatness emerged and developed over the centuries. Changes in the official use of British terminology are highlighted as a reflection of dwindling historical greatness: *the British Empire > The British Commonwealth* (1931); *The British Commonwealth > The Commonwealth* (1949); *Great Britain > Britain* (UK for short). The idea of British greatness flourished during the Brexit period (2016–2020). Special attention is paid to stylistic changes in Brexit discourses, reflecting political events and developments. My analysis discloses the role of frequent creative use of phraseological units, e. g., *a leap in the dark, to eat one's cake and have it, to kick the can down the road* etc. It offers insight into sustained creative use of metaphor as a reflection of painful and tortuous processes. I rely on findings of cognitive linguistics on thought and language [Gibbs 1999: 16–23].

This paper aims to explore the notion of British greatness, its origin and development over centuries, and the role it has played in Brexit-related events and processes. The study focuses on the interplay of history, politics and language, illustrating how figurative expressions are ingrained in a nation's cultural fabric and linguistic landscape.

Keywords: *British Empire, British exceptionalism, sustained metaphor, 2016 UK Referendum.*

CULTURE
CROSSROADS

Introduction

The theme of my article commands an interdisciplinary approach, involving research on metaphor and its creative stylistic use in political discourse, in conjunction with applied scholarship in the field of politics. I have drawn theoretical conclusions, applying the key tenets of both cognitive linguistics about the significance of the inextricable interrelation between thought and language on the one hand [Gibbs 2008; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989], and insights from a cognitive stylistic perspective on the other. Cognitive stylistics forms an integral part of cognitive linguistics, exploring figurative language and figurative meaning construction in discourse. In the cognitive stylistic framework, a stylistic technique, e. g. a metaphor, is regarded as a structure of thought and a tool of cognitive inference, applicable in novel instantiations of figurative thought [Naciscione 2010; 2020: 274].

For this research, empirical material of creative use of figurative thought has been chosen from my own collection of Brexit discourses, drawn from media texts, political speeches in the House of Commons, debates in the EU, analytical articles, videos, and cartoons. I have also drawn upon my academic and research experience I acquired when teaching the courses "British Studies" and "Cognitive Stylistics" at the Latvian Academy of Culture.

I have relied on the critical metaphor analysis method, developed by Charteris-Black. This method underscores the role of social cognition and the need of a broader social context for analysis [Charteris-Black 2014: 153–157]. Thus, the method is concerned with increasing awareness of the social aspects of language use. I fully agree that the study of social factors is essential in discourse analysis. However, historical, political, and cultural aspects of language use may also prove fundamental to analysis of a novel form and meaning in creative stylistic instantiations. I have used the method of interpretative empirical case studies, which enable me to explore intricate figurative use in Brexit discourses.

Analysis of my empirical material allows me to draw generalisations not only about political events, developments, and constant changes, but also to focus on sustained use of recurrent extended metaphors in Brexit discourses throughout the Brexit period as a reflection of the ongoing complexity and gravity of the challenges Britain had to face. Cognitive linguists have proved that metaphors reveal "multiple facets of human experience" [Gibbs 2017: 7], including political discourse in all its variety.

Novel creative use of recurrent metaphors reveals how people conceptualise changes in the external world and highlight their experiences and opinions. Cognitive linguistics has established an inseparable link between the mind, figurative thought, and language, including stylistic use of metaphorical language in political discourse.

Gibbs argues that contemporary political discourse is packed full of metaphors, many of which reveal important aspects of the figurative nature of political thought. Moreover, metaphors act as powerful persuasive devices [Gibbs 1994: 140–141].

A cognitive approach to research on extension of figurative meaning yields insights into use of extended metaphor from a cross-discourse perspective. Extension of figurative meaning discloses the workings of the human mind and provides sustainability of metaphorical thought and language, sustaining the narrative and creating a metaphorical continuum.

I will start with an overview of the early stages of British greatness and its further developments, as background information plays a significant part in comprehension and analysis of political discourse, reflecting the course of events and interpreting values.

Colonisation: A brief insight

British greatness stems from expansion and dominance in the world. As a seafaring nation, England was lured by commercial ambitions. The British Empire began to take shape during the early 17th century. The first British colony in North America was Jamestown, Virginia, established in 1607. In North America, the number of British colonies reached 13 which existed up to 1776 when they began their struggle for full independence from the British crown.

Once success was gained in North America, colonial expansion developed on a much broader scale. The flourishing era of the British Empire was the period from 1815 to 1914. Queen Victoria, glorified as the mother of the British Empire, was turned into an imperial symbol. The metaphor "the sun never sets on the British Empire" was accepted as a piece of unquestionable truth. Wismayer points out that "in the late 19th century the English were rulers of the waves, and England was the cradle of the industrial revolution, creating the largest empire in history" [Wismayer 2017]. For the British Empire, colonies were a source of wealth, provided by colonial natural resources, raw materials, slave and indentured labour, and slave trade.

The further destiny of the British Empire and its imperial footprints are best seen in use of the English language, as language is not only a reflection of a way of thinking, forming opinions and making judgements but also of changes introduced in the real world, well reflected in political terminology. Let me highlight some changes in official English terms, which disclose the fading historical greatness of the UK since World War I.

After World War I, the British Empire declined rapidly. The UK was left weakened and was not strong enough to govern the Empire. However, the UK was determined to maintain a dominant position, exercising control over its territories. Moreover, the term "empire" had unwelcome connotations, implying inequality,

and hinting at the fact that the empire was formed as a result of a conquest and subjugation. Therefore, the British Commonwealth was formed in 1926, implying that all its members were equal. It was in 1931 that the British Parliament passed the Statute of Westminster, introducing the term "the British Commonwealth of Nations", usually called "the British Commonwealth". Thus, a change of name was effected: *the British Empire > The British Commonwealth*.

After World War II, many British Commonwealth countries sought independence, and the association experienced a steady decline. In 1947 India gained independence. This was a major blow to the UK as it signified the collapse of British imperial power. The London Declaration of 1949 stipulated another change, and "the British Commonwealth of Nations" became "the Commonwealth of Nations", or "the Commonwealth" for short: *The British Commonwealth > The Commonwealth*. In this way, the offensive term "Empire" was replaced by the inoffensive term "the Commonwealth", which is an international association and a community, founded for the common good. Stylistically, this is a clear-cut case of use of political euphemism whose purpose is to avoid unpleasantness and follow the politeness principle[1].

Thus, the main purpose of the Commonwealth was to promote international cooperation and to advance development in member countries. However, the process of disintegration continued, so that by the late 1960s most of Britain's territories had become independent countries. Britain lost its dominant position in the Commonwealth. It merely became one among the members of the Commonwealth. Former greatness had turned into the setting sun. Britain frequently resorted to the use of masterfully crafted political euphemisms to mitigate the disturbing effect of the fact.

In the post-war period, the British economy required a large number of immigrant workers. The British Nationality Act 1948 allowed free entry into Britain for all Commonwealth citizens. This resulted in mass migration to the "mother country" in the 1950s and 1960s. The large immigrant population made a positive contribution to the UK economy while, at the same time, immigration caused considerable problems and concerns. In Britain, the legacy of immigration forms part of the post-colonial present.

As to the English language, it has yet to come to terms with Britain's colonial legacy: some imperial thinking still lingers on. This is manifest in several areas in Britain. E.g., it appears in the names of some orders and medals awarded by the ruling monarch: OBE – the Order of the British Empire; KBE – Knight of the British

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[1] A euphemism is a stylistic technique that is used to cover up the unembellished and unaltered truth, which may sound unpleasant or offensive, for instance, when the fall of the empire is presented as a deliberate dismissal of its former colonies with a grace unique in history.

Empire; Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. The names of some institutions still contain the epithet "imperial" in their name, such as The London Imperial Medical College. The Imperial College London, focusing on science, engineering, medicine, and business, is called "Imperial" for short.

Imperial units were first defined in the British Weights and Measures Act 1824. Imperial measures were replaced by the metric system in the UK in 1971. Yet the imperial terms still linger in the people's collective memory. The British people buy their cheese in pounds and ounces, their milk and beer in pints and their petrol in gallons. Fruit and vegetables are frequently sold by the pound. Is the use of imperial measurements just a tradition? Or perhaps old habits die hard. There is little hope that British people will drop imperial measurements and start thinking in the metric system in the near future.

Subjugation and dominance in the British Isles: A diachronic view

The early history of England goes back to the Anglo-Saxon conquest of the south and east of the British Isles after the Romans left Britain in 450 AD. The Anglo-Saxons were Germanic tribes, and they called their new country *Englaland* (OE) after the biggest of their tribes – the Angles. The Anglo-Saxons never invaded Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland, which remained Celtic. England was founded as a kingdom in 927 AD.

It was in 1169 when England started the conquest of Ireland. In 1171 King Henry II landed in the north of Ireland with a large army and colonised all Ireland. However, the name of England was not changed at the time. Ireland was fully conquered in the 16th and 17th centuries. Thus, in effect Ireland was England's first colony; it was neither Newfoundland nor Jamestown.

In the late 13th century, King Edward I started the conquest of Wales, claiming it as a territory of England. The conquest lasted from 1277 till 1283 when Wales was annexed to England. No change of the name of the country was introduced. King Edward I made his new-born son the Prince of Wales.

The first period of the English invasion of Scotland lasted from 1174 till 1296. This was followed by numerous other invasions. In 1650 Oliver Cromwell led an invasion, which resulted in the occupation of all Scotland. The name of England was changed by the Act of Union in 1707, passed by the Parliament of England: *England > the United Kingdom of Great Britain*. Thus, England had conquered all the island of Great Britain. Richard Price points out that from its very beginning the very idea of Britain was an imperial construction. Britain itself was a result of the process of English imperialism [Price 2006: 602].

The full subjugation of Ireland took a long period of time. Great Britain annexed Ireland and Parliament was joined to the British Parliament. In reality, the Irish

Parliament was abolished in 1801. It is important to note the use of the political euphemism "joined" instead of "abolished". "The Act of Union" is another political euphemism as there was no mutual consent. Ireland was forcibly integrated into the United Kingdom of Great Britain. The official name of Great Britain was changed again: *the United Kingdom of Great Britain > the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.*

The Irish War of Independence lasted from the Easter Rising in 1916 until 1922 when Ireland finally gained independence except for Northern Ireland, which remained part of Great Britain. Another change of name followed: *the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland > the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, which is the present full name of the UK. Changes in terminology reveal the latest political developments in the country and shape its identity. The notion of greatness is closely linked not only with the pursuit of success in conquests but also with myths of supremacy and exceptionalism. "The idea of supremacy over other nations is deep rooted in British subconsciousness, also called British exceptionalism" [Tilford 2017].

An insight into Brexit: The notion of *greatness*

Winston Churchill wrote in 1930, "We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not comprised. We are interested and associated, but not absorbed" [Churchill 1930]. Hence, Brexit started well before 2016. Churchill was a firm believer in Britain's greatness, and his ideas seem to have settled in British minds. This finally came to the fore in the 2016 UK Referendum. Bonnet argues that Churchill and his image shaped Brexit. Churchill's overbearing influence created the Churchillian myth. The way Brexiteers made the most of the Churchill myth is aptly called the Churchill factor, a factor that influenced the result of the Referendum and the Brexit debate [Bonnet 2020: 65].

The idea of Britain's greatness was upheld by those British political leaders whose objective was to restore the United Kingdom as a sovereign, independent country by exiting the European Union. In 1950 Margaret Thatcher presented her political platform in her *General Election Address*, saying, "We are proud of the British Commonwealth and Empire". She also emphasised the importance of the issue of enhancing Britain's greatness: "We Conservatives are not afraid to face the future whatever problem it entails, because it is our earnest desire to make *Great* Britain *great* again" [Thatcher 1950]. Stylistically, the phrase "to make *Great* Britain *great* again" forms a pun, which invariably emerges as the result of using one word in two meanings in the same context. Puns are intended to create a special effect, thus boosting memorability. In her later activities, Thatcher was strictly against any closer union with the European Union.

Nigel Farage, an ardent anti-EU campaigner, played a key role in the Leave campaign before the UK 2016 Referendum. His forceful and emotional speeches kept spreading right-wing Eurosceptic ideas. The Leave side was led by powerful nationalist messages: "I want my country back!", "Take back control", and above all "MAKE BRITAIN GREAT AGAIN", echoing Donald Trump's rhetoric. High quality Nigel Farage gifts and merchandise with the latter slogan were on sale: not only caps, but also designer T-shirts, mugs, stickers, posters and more with the aim of creating nostalgia for a great and successful future. The visual representation of these messages is not merely a tool of political marketing; it pursues a cognitive aim: to persuade people by enhancing their perception and comprehension, motivated by the conceptual metaphor SEEING IS BELIEVING. The aim of Farage's campaign was to impress the idea of greatness on the visual memory of the people. Rudolf Arnheim, a prominent cognitive psychologist, developed the concepts of visual thinking and visual perception as cognitive activities. Arnheim argues that perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined [1969].

Reiteration of the key idea of greatness throughout the Brexit period is a stylistic technique to imprint the vision in people's minds by reasserting and sustaining it: leaving means thriving outside the European Union. Theresa May offered a vision of global Britain in 2017 [Harrington 2017]. In her mind, the British economy was to flourish as never before, and it was to have a trading masterplan: "Empire 2.0". Wismayer calls it "the emotional residue of lost empire" [Wismayer 2017]. In his keynote speech to the British Parliament in 2019, Prime Minister Boris Johnson pledged that Brexit would "make our great United Kingdom the greatest place in the world" [Reuters 26.07.2019].

Johnson resorts to reiteration of "great" and its hyperbolic use in the superlative degree for emphasis. In this way, the keyword "great" becomes the magic catchword that would lead Britain to prosperity and make Britain the greatest place on earth.

Use of sustained metaphor in representation of Brexit:
A cognitive stylistic view

Throughout the whole Brexit period, political speakers and analysts resorted to use of sustained metaphorical thought to uncover unexpected, frequently excruciating developments and processes. Metaphor has been recognised as a technique of reasoning and argumentation in perceptual and conceptual understanding of experience. It is a powerful tool in political media discourse. Research on sustainability of political thought has been done in the framework of cognitive stylistics, exploring figurative language and construction of figurative meaning in discourse. Cognitive stylistics, in comparison to conventional stylistics, views the stylistic technique of metaphor

not only as a pattern of language but first and foremost as a structure of thought [Naciscione 2020: 274].

Cognitive semantic analysis of Brexit discourses allows me to offer an insight into the sustained creative use of recurrent powerful metaphors as a reflection of the distressing developments since 2016, e. g. *marriage and divorce*, *a leap in the dark*, *to eat one's cake and have it*, *cherry picking*, *the clock is ticking*, *back to square one*, *to kick the can down the road*, *cliff edge*, *a level playing field*.

Interestingly, the striking metaphors *marriage* and *divorce*, denoting Britain's entry into and her withdrawal from the EU, appeared in the media well before the 2016 UK Referendum. A Bloomberg video, entitled *Brexit – A messy divorce or a disastrous marriage?* argues that Britain is flirting with divorce from the European Union, one of the world's most powerful trading blocs [Bloomberg 03.03.2016].

The use of extended metaphor[1] in Tim Lister's analytical article *Brexit: An often rocky marriage ends in sudden divorce[2]* [Lister 25.06.2016] uncovers the tortured and burdensome relationship between the UK and the EU over the whole length of the UK's membership in the EU:

(1) "*As underlined marriages go, 43 years is not bad. But ever since Britain and Europe tied the knot in   1973, the relationship has been a tortured one with accusations of infidelity (..) on both sides.*
The lengthy courtship had none of the sulfuric resentment of the divorce that would follow four decades later (..) The honeymoon didn't last (..)" [Lister 25.06.2016].

Harold Wilson's Labour government demanded a renegotiation of *the pre-nup* just two years after the British flag was raised over the European Community's headquarters on January 1, 1973:

(2) "*Cracks started to show. Once again, the marriage was on the rocks. Thatcher seethed against plans for the ever-closer union. "No, no, no," she famously told the House of Commons in 1990*" [Lister 25.06.2016].

Let me take a closer look at the use of the proverb *You can't have your cake and eat it.* This has been recurrent in a great deal of media discourse covering Brexit. It reveals the political position of the two conflicting sides in the UK-EU negotiations.

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[1] Extended metaphor is one of the resources to convey sustained human experience. It is an instantial stylistic technique, involving a string of images sustained and tied together by the base metaphor, creating a cohesive network of associative metaphorical bonds. The metaphorical sub-images are linked metonymically by associations of contiguity [Naciscione 2016: 264].

[2] In this paper, all underlining is mine, used to highlight the metaphor and its creative use in discourse.

The proverb *You can't have your cake and eat it* attracted attention early in 2016 when Boris Johnson announced that he was backing the Brexit campaign. He voiced his vision of leaving the EU and keeping the benefits of its membership at the same time: "I am *pro having my cake and pro eating it*"[1]. The media were quick to respond: "*No, Boris, you can't have your Brexit cake and eat it too*" [White 2016]. Criticism was raised against Johnson's political stance, mainly by opponents of Brexit. Moreover, this proverb appeared in innumerable creative instantiations in various speeches, articles, caricatures, and cartoons, both humorous and sarcastic. This metaphorical thought was sustained in Brexit discourses for almost five years.

In the Brexit talks, the proverb *You can't have your cake and eat it* was used to illustrate the attempt by the British negotiating team headed by Theresa May to keep the benefits of the EU, at the same time being independent of the EU: out of the four freedoms enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, Theresa May picked free trade, leaving the other freedoms out. To rebut this political move, President of the European Council Donald Tusk resorted to irony, extending the metaphor *You can't have your cake and eat it* in his Speech at the European Policy Centre on 13 October 2016:

(3) "*In fact, the words uttered by one of the leading campaigners for Brexit and proponents of the "cake philosophy" was pure illusion: that one can have the EU cake and eat it too. To all who believe in it, I propose a simple experiment. Buy a cake, eat it, and see if it is still there on the plate.*
The brutal truth is that Brexit will be a loss for all of us. There will be no cakes on the table.
For anyone. There will be only salt and vinegar" [Tusk 13.10.2016].

To sum up, Brexit discourses display recurrent use of sustained metaphors that highlight the dramatic events and developments on Britain's way out of the EU. Moreover, creative use is genuinely thought-provoking: it engages the mind. In sustained use, the metaphor is not lost; it undergoes creative changes, determined by the thought and the context. Britain's desperate attempts show that the British authorities may have finally realised that they are losing the privileges and benefits which EU membership involves. Thus, for the United Kingdom, regaining greatness is much further down the road than ever before.

While Britain has been making efforts to strengthen its position at the international level and establish new international trade links, the danger of a possible break-up has been lurking at home. In the United Kingdom, cracks between

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[1] The phraseological unit is a stable, cohesive combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning [Naciscione 2010: 8].

England and the other three countries had existed before; however, after Brexit they have become more visible and audible. George Monbiot's article "*That creaking sound? It's the United Kingdom starting to break apart*" claims that the creaking sound is made by the United Kingdom starting to break apart [Monbiot 05.05.2021.]. It is interior disunity that aggravates the situation, constituting a major danger for the British claim to greatness. The headline commands attention by use of a novel onomatopoeic metaphor, which is extended in the sub-headline. In the article, the situation is illustrated by a visual representation, featuring a UK map, where the four countries are clearly delineated by visible cracks, thus extending the initial metaphor, and creating a visual pun.

Monbiot [05.05.2021]. Illustration: Sébastien Thibault.

Each country is marked by their national flag with no Union Jack in sight. Furthermore, the initial metaphor is extended in the text of the article: *That creaking sound? It's the ship of state starting to break up*, metaphorically signifying the breakup of the UK. It is interior disunity that aggravates the situation, constituting a major danger for the British claim to greatness.

Conclusion

Each aspect of Britain has its own history, leaving footprints in identity, language, and way of thinking. The idea of British greatness is deep-seated. It goes back to expansion in the British Isles and the early days of the British Empire. The

assumption of greatness has played a significant role in Brexit processes and its outcome. Brexiteers saw Brexit as a way to end the alleged domination of the EU over the UK and open up ways to make Britain great again on a global scale.

My empirical material reveals that metaphor is a powerful persuasive technique, applicable in different types of political discourse. It enhances the impact of an analytical article or a political speech, serving argumentation and memorability by highlighting and interpreting the message. Extended metaphors are used to convey sustained political and human experiences, conflicts, clashes, and changes, which emerge in the world. They play a significant role by presenting and developing argumentation with the aim of making a point and driving it home. Political arguments convince us, seeking to serve as a drive for reasoning and persuasion. Cognitive stylistic analysis examines the sustained creative use of metaphor in political discourse, shedding light on the role of frequent creative use of phraseological units and extended metaphors to portray British striving for greatness and its manifestation in Brexit related events. Thus, creative stylistic use of figurative language, metaphor in particular, works to achieve political ends. Political discourses reflect changes in and attitudes to political and social issues and events, and hence changes and developments in Britain, the British way of thinking and the British mindset.

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