

## METAPHORICAL STRATEGIES IN BREXIT DISCOURSE

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### Abstract

Metaphors are influential rhetorical devices that express meaning by describing one thing in terms of another—often in vivid, imaginative, or emotionally charged ways. They are frequently found in persuasive forms of writing, such as political speeches and tabloid journalism, because they can subtly influence how audiences perceive and respond to issues. Metaphors aren't just literary—they're strategic. In political language metaphors can simplify issues, trigger emotional responses, shape public opinion, justify actions (e.g., leaving the EU = "escaping a sinking ship"). These metaphors often portrayed the UK as a victim seeking liberation, using familiar and evocative imagery to simplify complex political issues. There are different types of metaphor, too. In the article common types of metaphor are highly recommended and viewed. War, journey, container, natural disaster and machine or economic metaphors are considered to be common types of metaphor in

Pro-Brexit newspapers, particularly UK tabloids like *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, and *Daily Express*, employed vivid and emotionally charged metaphors to frame the Brexit debate in a manner that resonated with readers. These metaphors often portrayed the UK as a victim seeking liberation, using familiar and evocative imagery to simplify complex political issues. Metaphors were central to how they portrayed Brexit — often depicting it as a struggle for freedom or a chance to "take back control."

During the Brexit debate, pro-Remain newspapers employed a variety of metaphors to illustrate the complexities and potential pitfalls of the UK's departure from the EU. These metaphors aimed to convey the perceived risks and challenges associated with Brexit.

**Keywords:** rhetorical device, war metaphors, journey metaphors, container metaphors

**Main idea.** Brexit has brought innovations not only in making changes in the life of society but also in the development of language. Many metaphors related to the word "Brexit" have accelerated the creation of new words and phrases. The metaphors associated with Brexit are forms used within the framework of "War and Invasion," which call for the protection and security of the nation.

In a cartoon published by *The Guardian* on December 28, 2016, the Queen is depicted outside a polling station wearing an outer garment with a Union Jack and a sign that reads "Brexit Now," symbolizing her support for the Leave campaign. In March 2016, *The Sun* published a front-page headline claiming "Queen Backs Brexit", citing unnamed sources who alleged that Queen Elizabeth II had expressed Eurosceptic views in private conversations. Buckingham Palace lodged a complaint, emphasizing the Queen's constitutional role of political neutrality. The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) ruled that the headline was "significantly misleading," as the article did not provide sufficient evidence to support the claim. Despite the ruling, *The Sun* stood by its story. [1]

Meanwhile, *The Independent*, in its July 15, 2016 issue, portrays Boris Johnson firing a toy gun and speaking through speech bubbles. One of the bubbles reads: "Hello foreign oiks, let's do business." This cartoon satirizes Johnson's approach to foreign diplomacy, portraying it as casual and somewhat mocking. The term "oik" is a British slang word that can be derogatory, typically referring to someone perceived as uncouth or of lower social status. In this context, the phrase likely serves as a satirical representation of

Johnson's informal and sometimes controversial communication style, especially in diplomatic settings.

At the bottom of the image, it shows four different leaders of EU member states turning their backs and running away in fear, with the caption displaying shouts of "The Boris is Coming, the Boris is Coming!" In this cartoon, the phrase "The Boris" symbolizes the entirety of Britain and its supporters.

*The Independent* positions Boris more as a symbol of political absurdity or instability. However, pro-Brexit tabloids frame him as the people's champion, often using war metaphors and hypermasculine language. The headlines, such as "Boris Saves Brexit!", "Boris Unleashed!", "Boris Blasts Brussels!", "He's Back to Save Britain!" frame Boris as a heroic figure.

In a televised interview with an EU member, Boris Johnson briefly states, "I believe that this Thursday can be our country's 'Independence Day.'" This statement was picked up by the popular newspaper *The Sun* and featured on its front page. Here, Boris Johnson emphasizes the need for Britain to gain independence. He uses allegory by referring to the phrase "Independence Day," implying that the EU represents a colonial power. [2, p.77]

Given its substantial readership, *The Sun's* pro-Brexit stance likely had a significant impact on public opinion. Its editorial choices, headlines, and campaign materials contributed to the broader media environment that influenced voters during the referendum period. Following the referendum result, *The Sun* celebrated the Leave victory with the headline "See EU later!", a play on words reflecting the UK's decision to exit the EU.

In the week leading up to the referendum, the Leave campaign posted 60 tweets that ironically associated David Cameron with the word “traitor.” It was claimed that there would never be a real chance to be elected into EU membership, and that David Cameron did not make a political choice by holding the referendum. By making such a decision, he became a target of the Leave campaign, as he essentially belonged to the Remain side.

One tweet stated: “*With more loyalty to a terrorist state outside of Europe can a traitor be trusted? #Cameron #Brexit #VoteLeave*” Another tweet read: “*Here’s the deal. Although we voted for #Brexit the Conservative Party will deny us our wish by imposing the quisling #TeresaMay as PM.*” [29 retweets]

The frequent use of the word *quisling* in the referendum debate created an allegory of betrayal. Hard Brexit supporters believed that if the Leave campaign succeeded, Britain would regain its independence. These types of statements on social media expressed a harsh tone of treason. For them, if the people were sovereign, forcing them to rely on any external power source was seen as degrading. Through allegory, the EU was portrayed as an untrustworthy opposition and ruling force.

The expression “*Distrust and Betrayal*”, commonly used by Brexit supporters, specifically targeted David Cameron and others who opposed leaving the EU. After the June 2016 elections, they started to be labeled as *soft Brexiteers*, because they were perceived as those who turned Britain into a “*vassal state*”—traitors who had deceived the public.

Tweets like: “*The #EU have stolen our Fish #WeWantOurFishBack #EURef #VoteLeave #Brexit #remain #INorOUT #LabourIN #No2EU*” use the word “*stolen*” in its literal sense. The presence of so many hashtags shows that the author used Twitter’s grammar—concise and impactful language—for maximum reach.

The “*War and Invasion*” metaphor, first employed by pro-Brexit Twitter users, was later countered by Remain supporters. The core Leave group argued for the return of control over legislation, finance, and trade. Throughout the Vote Leave campaign, the slogan:

“*The EU serves big corporations - not the people! #VoteLeave tomorrow and take back control.*” [244 retweets] was repeated regularly. The phrase “*take back control*”, also used by Boris Johnson in *The Sun*, referred to reclaiming all forms of political cooperation.

He declared: “*In a heroic act of national self-belief we decided to take back control of our laws, borders, and all the cash we send to Brussels.*” The statement captures the essence of Boris Johnson’s rhetoric during the Brexit campaign. While this exact wording may not be directly attributed to him, it encapsulates the themes he emphasized throughout the campaign. [3]

One of the key features of the Leave campaign was its use of imperative slogans, where one command often masked or reinforced another. For example, the slogan “*Vote Leave, Take Back Control*”, featured on billboards, posters, and even on an image projected onto the *Angel of the North*—a 20-meter-tall sculpture near

Gateshead in northeast England—used a double imperative structure. Throughout the campaign, this command appeared frequently in speeches and texts, often in the form “*Let’s take back control*,” emphasizing the collective first-person plural.

In similar fashion, in the slogan “*Get Britain out of the EU*,” used on the white cliffs near Dover alongside the figure of Saint George, the pronouns *we* and *our* were implied, even if not explicitly stated. The word “*Let*” was conditionally understood but not written, creating a rallying sense of urgency and unity.

Even words like “**Yes**” and “**No**” could function as commands. For example, in the phrase “*Not to the European Union, Yes to the Wider World*,” if we insert the word *say* before “no” and “yes,” the sentence transforms into two imperative clauses: “*Say no to the European Union, say yes to the Wider World.*” Here, the phrase *wider world* evokes a sense of adventure and vast potential—something many people longed for. Although the EU is not directly described as small or limiting, the lack of a modifier before *wider* subtly implies that the EU is, by contrast, narrow and restricted in its opportunities.

This same idea—that the EU offers limited opportunities—was reflected in the opposing party’s Twitter post featuring the “**Stop the EU**” poster. One of the most striking slogans, “*Think outside the EU box*” was followed by lines like “*There is a world of trade out there*” and “*Vote no to end this madness.*” The EU’s boundaries are thus metaphorically compared to a small box, dwarfed by the countless opportunities offered by the broader global trade environment.

Another feature of pro-Brexit newspapers was their repeated use of the pronoun “**we**” to refer to the public or the nation. This is somewhat understandable, as readers often choose newspapers that reflect their own beliefs and values. However, even those who read viewpoints contrary to their own might, through the use of “*we*,” feel a sense of inclusion—positioning themselves among the “*better-informed*” or morally superior group.

The idea of external interference—real or perceived—was also used to unite people in the name of national unity. One example was U.S. President Obama’s attempt to support David Cameron and the Remain campaign. This gesture arguably did more harm than good. Political commentator and television personality Carole Malone, writing in the pro-Remain paper *Daily Mirror*, expressed her anger over what she saw as an unwelcome intrusion:

“*How dare Barack Obama tell the British people we must stay in the EU and threaten that if we don’t he’ll make sure we’re shoved ‘to the back of the queue’ for any new trade deals? Is this the act of an ally or is it a bully telling a country he clearly thinks he has under his thumb to do what he says – or else?*” [4]

Malone’s reaction captures the larger Leave sentiment: frustration at perceived foreign influence and a call for reclaiming sovereignty and self-determination.

Carole Malone, by repeatedly using the pronoun *we*, conveys the anger and disgust of the entire nation. Similarly, pro-Leave newspapers such as *The Sun*,

*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *Daily Telegraph* expressed the same attitude when reporting on Obama's comments.

**SUN SAYS:** "We urge our readers to beLEAVE in Britain and vote to quit the EU on June 23. This is our last chance to remove ourselves from the undemocratic Brussels machine... and it's time to take it. We are about to make the biggest political decision of our lives. *The Sun* urges everyone to vote LEAVE. We must set ourselves free from dictatorial Brussels."

In the article published in June 2016, titled *we*, the pronoun "we" refers to *The Sun's* editorial team and its owner. In the other sentences, however, the pronoun *we* represents the nation. Thus, the Brexit campaign emphasizes that Britain, with its security and military strength, can do a better job than its European counterparts. "*beLEAVE in Britain*" is a pun combining "*believe*" and "*leave*". This clever linguistic fusion reinforces the Leave campaign's message with emotional patriotism and positivity. It implies that to *believe* in Britain is inherently to *leave* the EU—merging national faith with political action. This phrase "*undemocratic Brussels machine*" dehumanizes the EU, presenting it as a cold, mechanical, and foreign bureaucracy. "*This is our last chance*": This introduces temporal urgency, a common persuasive tactic. It paints the referendum as a now-or-never moment, forcing readers to see the vote as their only opportunity to act.

Although the idea of establishing European Rapid Reaction Forces had been discussed for several years, no concrete outcome was achieved. In 2016, Brussels began to develop a military research and development program. According to the plan, whether this posed a threat or an opportunity for the EU army was addressed only superficially by the Leave campaign. In an article by Nick Gutteridge in *Daily Express* in 2016, references are made to war veterans, with images of the Queen and British soldiers' graves in the trenches of World War I, invoking past victories and using pronouns like *we* and *us* to convey a more emotional tone.

Another feature of the Leave campaign was its use of shorter and simpler sentences. The EU's democratic deficit was strongly highlighted, while the Remain campaign's responses in this regard were weak. Suzanne Moore, in her speech characterized by short sentences typical of tabloid newspapers, criticizes the EU in plain language:

"*It doesn't look to me like a democracy. Nor does it appear accountable. This matters. Not a single one of my pro-EU friends could name their MEP when I asked them. Maybe this pales among issues like security, workers' rights and border control, but as a representative democracy it is sorely lacking.*" [5]

Another method used by the Leave campaign was the use of syntactically flexible words. These words could function as adjectives, verbs, or combine with nouns to create positively connoted expressions. For example, expressions such as *free speech*, *free will*, and *freedom* used by the Leave campaign demonstrate this. The campaign argued that Britain would be free from European laws, regulations, and bureaucracy. In a short article on the website *betteroffout.net*, we can see a

comparison between a metaphor of restriction and the economic consequences:

"*Tied to the EU, growth is 0.3%. Free from the EU it's more*" [6]

Here, the word *tied* is used to imply that the EU is a trap. It is synonymous with the word *trapped*.

In their article for *The Express*, Rebecca Perring and Monika Pallenberg repeatedly use the word *shackles* both in the headline and throughout the body of the article. Later, they also use the word *bloc*. The word *free* appears in both the introduction and the headline.

"*No more shackles: UK could BREAK FREE of EU laws as early as June 24 if Brexit wins. Germans fear Britain will be able to break FREE from the shackles of European laws on June 23 if the nation backs Brexit. Bundestag experts have expressed concerns the UK will go unpunished if the people vote to quit the 28-nation bloc during next week's EU referendum.*" [7]

The concern among major EU member states about whether Britain would go unpunished if it left during the campaign reflects the EU's authoritarian character. By portraying the EU as a domineering entity that holds its members in iron chains, it suggests that the Union does not tolerate rebellious behavior.

In *The Sun*, Hawkes reports that Boris Johnson told his audience during a televised debate that they must seize the opportunity to liberate themselves from the wreckage of Europe. The expression *taking back control* serves as a call to reject compliance with every EU regulation.

One of the most frequently used expressions involving the word *free* is *set Britain free*. On the day before the vote, *The Sun on Sunday* published a headline: "*A vote for Brexit is all it takes to set Britain free*" [8]

Similarly, the *Daily Mail*, in an editorial article by an anonymous editor titled "*How leaving the EU could set Britain free*" [2016], compares the warnings from Chancellor George Osborne about the economic damage Brexit might cause with the rhetoric of leading Leave supporter Michael Gove. Gove's statements portray the Leave campaign as a liberating and empowering force, symbolizing freedom in contrast to the EU's constraints.

In texts prepared during the referendum period, we see the use of complex noun compounds. These constructions serve as stronger descriptors than standard adjective-noun or noun-noun combinations. Terms like *job-destroying* and its variants are used to criticize EU regulations. Stevie Beer, reporting on a speech by skilled political communicator Michael Gove—well aware of the power of rhetorical language—notes Gove's use of expressions such as: "*job-destroying, misery-inducing, unemployment-creating tragedy.*" [9]

Avoiding verb-based clauses in favor of stacked noun phrases serves to frame these statements more as undeniable facts than speculative claims, emphasizing the alleged harms of EU membership.

To express that the migrant influx posed a serious threat to national security, pro-Brexit newspapers frequently used highly emotive words and expressions. They even referenced the names of natural disasters—*flood*, *tidal wave*, and even *tsunami*—to describe what

they perceived as destructive. Military terms such as *invasion* and *army of immigrants* were also used. Words like *hordes*, *swarms*, and similar expressions were employed to convey extreme danger and were often accompanied by seemingly factual justifications.

Professional journalists are generally very sensitive about linking migrants to criminal activity. They avoid criticism that suggests specific ethnic or religious groups are responsible for legal violations. In a 2016 article in *The Express*, Nick Gutteridge writes about the tension between Angela Merkel and other EU member states such as Austria, Poland, and Hungary, who wished to impose serious obligations regarding accepted migrants. Gutteridge highlights the public discontent and anger at Germany's dominant stance. While he does not directly criticize Merkel, he uses expressions like *unprecedented migration* and *mass influx of newcomers* [10, p. 98].

Pro-Brexit media did not hide facts about the issue, particularly numbers related to migrants. During the referendum campaign, newspapers such as *The Telegraph*, *The Mail*, and *The Express* shared accurate information. However, none of them explicitly stated that they supported actions motivated by racist hatred. In the lead-up to the 2016 referendum, *The Telegraph* published articles provoking fear and disgust toward immigration. The headline from 2016 illustrates this approach:

*"By 2066, white Britons 'will be outnumbered' if immigration continues at current rates"* [11]

The article evokes fear that immigration would harm traditional British culture and identity, criticize the European Convention on Human Rights for preventing Britain from deporting foreign criminals, and question the financial resources spent on refugees, suggesting they could be used more effectively elsewhere.

This narrative gradually intensified. For example, the media issued hysterical warnings about the threat of war in Europe. As David Cameron stated in his speech, leaving the EU would cost each British household more than 4,300 euros—an economic argument that was framed more in terms of national security. Details from Mr. Cameron's speech were leaked early to *The Daily Mail*. The newspaper mocked the content with the headline: *"Europe risks war and genocide if Britain votes to leave EU."*

In *The Express*, Stephen Pollard published an article just before election day making ironic remarks about the increasing use of "Project Fear" by the Remain campaign:

*"Forget David Cameron's warning that we would cause World War Three if we leave the EU, bonkers as that scare tactic was. Forget the idea that we would suddenly be plunged into a recession from which there will be no escape. In fact, forget all the nonsense the Remain camp have spouted as they desperately try to stop the British people voting to leave."* [12]

From a historical perspective, newspapers see it as their duty to call on voters to help "strengthen" Britain again. *The Daily Express* also allowed space for Lexit [left-wing Brexit] voices to be heard. Brendan Chilton,

leader of the Labour Leave campaign, made a passionate call in *The Express*, urging the country to return to its proud political heritage:

*"Up to 40 per cent of Labour voters are set to vote Leave on June 23 – and this figure will rise. It is extremely embarrassing to see senior Labour figures bowing to the EU as if it were a compassionate deity handing out rights to grateful serfs."* [13]

On the eve of the vote, *The Sun* reported on the final efforts of leading Brexit figures to gain support, describing Boris Johnson's use of dramatic and exaggerated language to frame Brexit as a defining moment in history. The article praised *Sun* readers' intelligence and courage:

*"Sun readers have the future of our country in their hands. They represent the best of Britain, the best of British instinct, and I know they believe in our great country and I hope very much they want to take our country forward tomorrow on a path toward greater democracy, greater openness to trade with the rest of the world and a more dynamic future for Britain. They know the brave cross they put on the ballot paper can make the difference between restoring democracy to Europe or remaining shackled to Europe. It will be a historic moment. It is time to take the chains off the giant, unshackled Britannia and let the Lion roar again!"*

In the same article, Priti Patel used fewer rhetorical terms but emphasized that the referendum was the *last chance to protect our democracy*. Michael Gove declared that if the Remain campaign won, it would be *game over* for Britain, claiming that without leaving the EU, Britain would never be able to reform.

As noted, it was very difficult for the Remain supporters to use inspirational rhetoric. They believed that keeping things as they were was already a good outcome. Only *The Mirror* newspaper, in its June 18, 2016 headline, used the phrase *"Make the EU Referendum Victory in Europe Day and vote Remain for the sake of the future."* Even here, attention was drawn to the Second World War. Less focus was placed on Britain's victory as an important part of Europe.

*The Express*, *Mail*, and *Sun* newspapers postponed the current historical context and presented the 2016 referendum as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to speak directly to the nation's fate. Brexit-oriented media worked to make immigration the central issue on the agenda—and thus push it into television discussions as well. *The Sun* believed that people should protect their freedom and resist the EU's democratic deficit and growing regulations. *The Sun* also believed it played a crucial role in securing a "Leave" vote in the referendum, even claiming responsibility for Neil Kinnock's defeat.

Germany's *Die Welt* newspaper responded to Theresa May's speech on her government's Brexit strategy with a headline titled *"Little Britain."* In response, *The Sun* addressed the *Die Welt* newspaper directly under Angela Merkel's name, preparing a special page and presenting it to the German Embassy in London. [13]

*"A MESSAGE TO MERKEL Little Britain? We've got a simple message for the critics who ridiculed the 17.4 million of you who voted Leave for daring to dump the EU: Would the last country to leave the*

*EU please turn out the lights.* The Sun last night turned the tables on the Germans who dubbed our great nation 'Little Britain'. "[20]

The Sun newspaper also used expressions like "unelected, arrogant, Brussels bigwig, chief Eurocrat, EU boss," and "heavy drinking" when introducing the President of the European Commission to the public. The website of the *Leave.EU* campaign described Belgian Immigration Minister Theo Francken not as he was, but as someone who treated member states of the EU with insensitivity. [10, p.156]

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, metaphors were not just decorative language during the Brexit debate — they were powerful tools that shaped public opinion, framed complex issues in emotionally resonant ways, and often reduced intricate political realities into simple, memorable images. Whether Brexit was portrayed as a "divorce," a "liberation," or a "leap into the unknown," these metaphors deeply influenced how people understood and felt about the process. By examining the metaphors surrounding Brexit, we can better see how language steers political thought, mobilizes emotions, and ultimately, drives historical change.

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