



Theresa May's Representation of Reality in her Brexit Speeches: Time and Self-projection as Meaningful Values

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses Theresa May's three seminal Brexit speeches. These describe the kind of desirable post-Brexit EU-UK relationship that she envisioned, and together constitute a corpus of 18,532 words. The speeches can be considered as landmarks on a timeline that was initially meant to lead to the delivery of Brexit. It is hypothesized that there may be meaningful differences between the speeches, and that these affect the representation of reality. These in turn would have a bearing on May's discursive self-representation as either an individualized or a collectivized social actor. To account for such representational values, the study draws on Halliday's Transitivity System (1994), starting from the clause and its potential to express ideational meanings. With the aim of uncovering more convincing and interesting findings, a statistical analysis is applied.

KEYWORDS: Brexit; Political discourse; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Social actor.

1. INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL SPEECHES

In the context of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) political discourse behaviour has received a great deal of attention from researchers, with interest ranging from racism, nationalism, elitism and migration to various other concerns of a socio-political or socio-

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economic nature (see e.g.: Billig, 1995; Chilton & Schäffner, 2002; Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak, 2006; Filardo-Llamas & Boyd (2018); Van Dijk, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2006; Wodak, 1989). Whatever the specific focus of the critical discourse approach, these types of study share an interest in the particular dialectical relationships that are created, in which the discursive event is shaped by specific institutional and social structures which, in turn, are conditioned by the discursive behavior itself.

1.1. Political speeches

With regard to the context of politics, I am particularly interested in the representational value underlying political speeches. This discourse practice has often been analyzed in terms of its argumentative rhetorical structure. A speech, according to Finlayson & Martin (2008: 450), is “an argument of some kind; an attempt to provide others with reasons for thinking, feeling or acting in a particular way.” It is also an institutionalized social practice, involving constraints on what counts as legitimate contributions to a goal or task (Thornborrow, 2002: 2-4), an asymmetrical one-directional persuasive talk that politicians address to the electorate. Political speeches, she adds, do not ‘expire’ the moment they are delivered, but are often recorded, transcribed and quoted, and can be evoked for various purposes at any future time.

The persuasive component is certainly a defining characteristic and has attracted interest from traditional research approaches to classical rhetoric and oratory. Budd (2015), Charteris-Black (2004, 2013), Harmon (2017) and Savoy (2010) focus on the use of metaphor as an essential figure of speech to understand argumentative behavior. Metaphors, as Charteris-Black (2013: 6-7) observes, is key in persuasion and is frequently employed in political speeches, given its potential to represent a *novel* way of viewing the world.

Schaffner (1996: 201) highlights how carefully prepared and linguistically controlled argumentative behavior in political speeches is, with a thoroughly planned discourse management that leaves little or no space for spontaneous talk on the part of the politician delivering the speech (see also Hillier, 2004 and Chilton, 2004). Given the kind of linguistic control underlying political speeches, it comes as no surprise that research on the use of lexis and grammar has received a great deal of attention towards accounting for argumentative behaviour. Hillier (2004: 126-127) points to personal pronouns as well as lexical and grammatical repetition as the main elements on which persuasion hinges.

As for personal pronouns, we might note Simon-Vandenberg's (1987) study comparing the incidence of *I* versus *We*-pronouns in political debates. While the first-person singular is characteristic of individualized personal speech, it is argued, the plural counterpart lends itself to more strategic possibilities (1987: 265-266), in that inclusive *We* may integrate a series of agents and elements which themselves may be presented in a concealed, non-explicit manner. In later work, Simon-Vandenberg (1997: 353) has noted that politicians' use of the personal pronoun *I* serves the purpose of setting up a personal profile, while the use

of plural *We* is meant to establish a sense of solidarity between politician and audience, making the addressees feel that the politician is one of them and identifies with them. Similarly, Fairclough (2000: 95-105) associates politicians' frequent use of *I* with an attempt to appear to have a strong personal identity, while *We*-pronoun is meant to convey feelings of solidarity with the audience. Hillier (2004: 131) and Chilton (2004: 56) consider the representational possibilities underlying the choice of plural *We*, with Hillier noting its potential to convey ambiguous meaning, in that it may be either inclusive or exclusive of addressees, and Chilton associating this reference with group identity, coalitions, or parties in terms of insiders versus outsiders.

Discursive studies on political speeches often focus on social agency, and in their attempt to portray a specific situation or political figure have addressed iconic or powerful politicians. A good example is Svensson's (2018) study on how Jean-Claude Juncker represents European identity but also projects himself as a social actor. Likewise, in the Brexit context, Harmon (2017), using Fairclough & Fairclough's (2012) practical reasoning model, analyses the candidacy speech of Andrea Leadsom, which was intended to portray this unexpected and internationally unknown candidate for the leadership of the British Conservative Party after David Cameron's resignation.

Political speeches have also been analyzed as a means of assessing how politicians make use of evaluative devices, resorting to positive or negative attitude markers, judgement or appreciation markers, either for criticizing their adversaries, or for praising a person's capacities or qualities (Cabrejas-Peñuelas & Díez-Prados, 2014: 161). Much of the research on the use of evaluative devices in political speeches has been developed under the Appraisal Theory framework (see Ananko, 2017).

Evaluation is also expressed through the notion of modality, a concept of great importance in politics, since politicians are often characterized in terms of their stance and various viewpoints or social positions (White, 2003: 259). Modality may account for politicians' attitudes towards the content of their propositions and has proved to be at work in the projection of ideological potential (Simon-Vandenberg, 1997: 344). As to political speeches in particular, we might note the study by Pinna (2007) which analyses the use of modal verbs in combination with epistemic formulas such as *I know*, *I believe* and *there is no doubt* in presidential speeches; these extended units of meaning, it is argued, manage to reflect and consolidate specific world views and systems of values (Pinna, 2007: 449).

Research into political speeches has also arisen from Systemic Functional Linguistic transitivity analysis (henceforth SFL, see e.g., Fawcett, 2010; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Halliday & Webster, 2014). This approach is concerned with what people do with language, starting from specific choices of lexico-grammatical items contained in systemic networks (Bloor & Bloor, 2018: 151). Meaning fulfils the three components of the semantic system known as metafunctions, termed ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings, and which

every clause may embrace (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004: 29-31). Yuqiong & Fengjie (2018), tracing the ideational component in a speech by David Cameron which sought to persuade the Scottish electorate not to vote for an independent Scottish nation, found that Cameron relied mostly on relational and material process types of representation of reality, which were associated with traits of objectivity. In Adjei et al. (2015) the ideational component is considered in the first State-of-the-Nation address by Ghana's ex-president John Evans Atta Mills, tracing his hypothetical manipulative behavior therein; material processes are identified as the most frequently occurring, these associated with the president's attempt to create a false sense of developmental progress.

In this context, Leung's (2018) analysis of May's ministerial discourse on the withdrawal of Britain from the EU is of special interest, as it is probably the closest to the focus of the present study. Relying on the SFL framework, the avoidance of first-person singular pronoun *I* in favor of the first-person plural pronoun *We* is found to be underpinned by ideology, and interpreted as a way of diverting excessive prominence from herself, integrating Europe in the inclusive *We* to emphasize solidarity and connection with the EU (Leung, 2018: 61).

Given that we are dealing here with a *woman* in power, research in the context of gendered mediation around May's political persona is expected, as is the comparison with former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Williams (2020) examines the gendered differences of these two women political leaders from the masculine leadership norm and finds more biased media attention being paid to May than to Thatcher. On the same lines, conducting a socio-semantic analysis of Theresa May's representation in three leading Spanish digital publications, Arrieta-Castillo & Berdasco-Gancedo (2020: 255) find that she is frequently allocated the role of culprit, malefactor or failure in the Brexit talks, and conclude that "the lack of courage or bravery attributed to the British politician connects with the tradition of representing women as individuals not suited for positions of great responsibility."

An interesting inquiry into what we might call a typical linguistic style that would characterize May's speech behaviour is offered by Bull & Strawson (2020). The authors extend the typologies devised for the analysis of equivocation in broadcast political interviews to May's performances at sessions of Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs), identifying a distinctive equivocation style, one which implies an intentional lack of clarity, confusion, and concealment, which may have an important bearing on how she represents reality in her speeches.

In the present study I will consider Theresa May's representation of reality in the three seminal speeches she delivered in the context of Brexit. Adopting an SFL approach, I trace at the clause construction level specific lexico-grammatical choices that she makes as a means of representing the world. The use of the *I* versus *We*-pronoun has proved to be an interesting lexico-grammatical device here, not only in the expression of linguistic control and discourse

management, but also as a strategic element underlying argumentative behaviour and hence as an ideological device (e.g., Fairclough, 2000; Hillier, 2004; Simon-Vandenberg, 1987). The *I-We* dichotomy is also associated with the importance of social agency in the study of political speeches (Catalano, 2011; Harmon, 2017; Svensson, 2018). By tracing May's pronominal choices, projecting herself in subject position either as an individualized or a collectivized social actor, we can capture essential elements in her political persona and understand some of the strategic potential behind these choices.

The contextualization of May's so-called Brexit speeches is important: Theresa May became Prime Minister (PM) following the UK's vote to leave the European Union on June 24, 2016 and David Cameron's subsequent resignation. In keeping with the result of the referendum, she committed to guaranteeing a smooth Brexit transition. On January 17, 2017 May delivered a speech to an audience of diplomats at London's Lancaster House, in which she set out her key priorities for the upcoming Brexit negotiations and her plans for a post-Brexit Britain. The importance of a customs agreement with the EU was said to be of paramount importance, as well as the need for an implementation period in the interest of the economies of both the EU and the UK (Dominiczak, January 2017, online).

Despite a series of EU-UK negotiations addressing the complex issue of the Irish border, and with European Council President Donald Tusk formally confirming the UK's departure from the EU, the talks led by May were considered not to be progressing quickly enough. This led to May's speech in Florence on the 22nd of September 2017, in which a clear attempt was made to convince the European Commission that work was in progress and hence that the parties involved could move on to a more consolidating second phase of negotiations. May referred to the importance of a transition period between the date of the UK's departure from the EU and the commencement of the new trading relationships, while insisting on the most advantageous scenario for post-Brexit trade with the EU (Henley, September 2017, online).

A third Brexit speech was given on March 2, 2018 at the Mansion House, London. Although May and EU leaders had agreed some terms by November 2017, these were rejected in the UK Parliament. The EU urged May to delay the UK's departure if a deal was not agreed before March 29, 2019, the initial deadline for Britain's exit. At the Mansion House, May clarified the terms agreed so far, insisting on a desirable post-Brexit trade relationship between the UK and the EU (Asthana, March 2018, online).

The three speeches can be seen as conforming to one unit, in that they all fall within the category of seminal speeches: (1) all three deal with key moments during the Brexit negotiations; (2) they all revolve around a desirable new post-Brexit relationship between the UK and the EU; and (3) their comparable length and the time span separating them indicate that they can be understood as similar and comparable events.

It is these three characteristics which also allow us to understand each speech as representing a landmark on the timeline that would eventually lead to Brexit. This allows us to explore both May's self-representation and her representation of reality in her speech-giving behaviour as a whole, but also to consider hypothetical changes between the speeches as the initial Brexit deadline, scheduled for March 29, 2019, approached. The two hypotheses to be addressed in this study, and the corresponding research questions, are then:

H.1. Considering the three speeches as landmarks on a timeline that was initially intended to lead to the delivery of Brexit, I assume that there will be meaningful differences between the speeches, affecting the representation of the reality of the EU-UK relationship. These, I assume, will have a bearing on Theresa May's discursive self-representation.

RQ1: Are there any statistically meaningful differences between speech 1 and speech 3 (with a fourteen-month time span) and speech 1 and speech 2 (with an eight-month time difference) in terms of the representation of reality?

H.2. Given the persuasive nature of the speeches, I also assume that former PM May will project herself as a social actor in accordance with a hypothetical strategic interest underlying the choice of an individualized vs collectivized self-representation.

RQ2: Are there any statistically meaningful differences between May's three speeches in terms of her discursive self-representation, either as an individual or as pertaining to a group?

Before I set out the methodological framework and procedure, I followed for data collection and coding, I will briefly discuss the key concepts relevant to the study: ideational meaning, clause construction patterns and their expression of processes of the representation of reality, agency and social actor, and the pronoun *I* versus *We* dichotomy in agentive position.

2. IDEATIONAL MEANING: REPRESENTATION OF REALITY

Chilton & Schäffner (2002: 25) argue that if we want to gain insights into any ideological expression in discourse behaviour, we should look either at its textual features, at the interactional component, or at its elements of representation. As the authors observe, these are inextricably linked to Halliday's (1994) textual, interpersonal and ideational meta-functions of language. Of these three components of the semantic system, the ideational function is of particular significance in the present study, inasmuch as "it considers the grammatical resources provided to construe, at clause level, meanings of the world, giving rise to possible representations of reality" (Bloor & Bloor, 2018: 151).

A clause construction pattern may lead to six possible categories of the representational processes of reality. These are termed *material process* (interpreted in terms of 'doing', expressing the notion that some entity 'does' something, optionally *to* some other entity; this giving rise to the participant roles of Actor and Goal, respectively), *verbal process*

(interpreted in terms of ‘saying’, recreating the participant roles of Sayer for the speaker, and Receiver for the intended recipient of the message), *mental process* (this integrates perception –*seeing, hearing*–, affection –*liking, fearing*– and cognition –*thinking, knowing, understanding*–, recreating the participant role of Senser), *relational process* (this includes intensive processes of being –*establishing a relationship of sameness between two entities*–, and circumstantial processes –*defining the entity in terms of location or time*–, invariably creating the participant roles of Identifier and Identified), *behavioural processes* (indicating an activity in which physical and mental aspects are inseparable, as in the case of *laugh*, with only one participant role, termed Behavior), and *existential processes* (when relating to something that exists or happens, expressed through impersonal *there*, the nominal group adopting the role of the Existent) (see Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Webster, 2014).

The clause, in its potential to render the representations noted above, projects the subject in agentive position as an *Actor (doer)*, a *Sayer*, a *Senser*, an *Identifier*, a *Behaver*, or an *Existent*. Whatever the complexity behind this nomenclature, these names converge in the concepts of *agency* and *social actor*, which are relevant for the present study, in that the focus lies in Theresa May’s self-representation while delivering her speeches, her role as agent being grammatically encoded through either a *We* or an *I*-subject. Since I rely on these inter-related concepts when looking at how she projects herself, it is worth briefly accounting for their specificities.

From a CDA perspective, agency entails looking into the subject’s potential for controlling other people’s behaviour. Duranti (2004: 453) endows the subject in agentive position with the linguistic ability to describe real and imaginary worlds, where word choices and combinations are viewed as acts that always do (and mean) something, and hence always convey an ideological position. Van Leeuwen (1996: 32-70) proposes the concept of *social actor*, setting out a socio-semantic inventory for understanding the ways in which these social actors can be discursively represented. He proposes categories for their classification that can be seen as pan-semiotic, with generalized representational possibilities. These involve categories such as *generic vs specific, excluded vs included, individualized vs collectivized* social actors, to mention just a few. It is the latter dichotomy, which is of specific interest in the present study, leading us to the options of an individualized *I* versus a collectivized *We* subject, as two choices available to Theresa May to project herself as a social actor in agentive position in her clause constructions.

In discussing the results of the present study, I will focus particularly on May’s choices of either *I* or *We*-pronoun in agentive position, with specific reference to the relevant authors discussed in the review section above (Simon-Vandenberg, 1987, 1997; Fairclough, 2000; Chilton, 2004; Hillier, 2004; Leung, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

The three so-called Brexit speeches, as delivered by PM Theresa May, were considered in their entirety for analysis here. The resulting corpus contained a total of 18,532 words, distributed as follows.

- 1) The Lancaster House speech (January 17, 2017): 6,444 words
- 2) The Florence speech (September 22, 2017): 5,379 words
- 3) The Mansion House speech (March 2, 2018): 6,709 words

These speeches were seen as seminal, in that they attracted a great deal of attention worldwide and sparked heated debate, in both the UK and the EU. The three speeches all revolve around a new and desirable post-Brexit relationship between the EU and the UK. They are also related, inasmuch as they represent fairly well-spaced reference points on a timeline that would eventually lead to the Brexit divorce: the time between speech one and two was eight months, and between the second and third, six months; the three speeches, then, covered a timespan of roughly fourteen months.

The methodology was as follows: first, the concordancing tool AntConc3.5.8 was used to identify clauses that contained the first personal pronoun *I* or *We* in subject position. This made it possible to identify the choice of clause construction patterns that would place PM Theresa May in agentive position, both as an individualized and as a collectivized social actor. The eventual choice of eligible samples for analysis was done manually, to guarantee that the pronouns *I* and *We* were always invariably referring back to PM May and to her persona represented collectively as being part of the British people. Special attention was paid to the inclusive *We* to refer exclusively to the British people/the UK, and not integrating other group references (e.g., our political party, the conservatives, the government etc.). This yielded the corpus for the study, distributed as follows:

- Speech 1: 158 clauses, 53 with *I* in subject position, 105 with *We* in subject position
- Speech 2: 145 clauses, 41 with *I* in subject position, 104 with *We* in subject position
- Speech 3: 198 clauses, 42 with *I* in subject position, 156 with *We* in subject position

The resulting clause samples were then manually assigned to one of the six processes of representation of reality, according to Halliday's Transitivity System. There follows one random sample (number of speeches in brackets) to illustrate each representational choice identified in the corpus:

Processes of representation of reality: I-subject (source of speech in brackets)

MENTAL (desiderative– <i>want</i>)	I want the broadest and deepest possible partnership (3)
MENTAL (other verbs of volition)	I hope that same spirit of unity will apply to Northern Ireland (1)
MENTAL (cognitive verbs <i>know, believe, think</i>)	I believe we can shape a new partnership (2)

MENTAL (perception)	I can see how important it is to provide business, the public sector, and everybody else with as much certainty as possible (1)
RELATIONAL	I am optimistic about what we can achieve (2)
VERBAL	I have told other EU leaders that we could give people the certainty (1)
MATERIAL	I stood in Downing Street and addressed the nation (3)

Processes of representation of reality: We-subject (source of speech in brackets)

MENTAL (desiderative– <i>want</i>)	We want to be the strongest friend and partner (2)
MENTAL (other verbs of volition)	We will need an arrangement for data protection (3)
MENTAL (cognitive verbs <i>know, believe, think</i>)	We believe a phased process of implementation is of mutual interest (1)
MENTAL (perception)	We see the country coming together (1)
RELATIONAL	We will no longer be members of its [European] single market (2)
VERBAL	We are also proposing a far reaching partnership (2)
MATERIAL	We are leaving the Common Agricultural Policy (3)

The incidences for each representational process were quantified, noting the specific frequencies for each speech and corresponding process (see tables 1 and 2 below). Mental processes turned out to have the most notable frequency in all three speeches, allowing for a distribution into four specific subgroups: mental processes with the desiderative verb *want*, with other verbs of volition (a term coined for the expression of wishes and preferences) like *desire, need, look forward to*; mental processes with the specific verbs of cognition *think, know, believe*; and those with verbs of mental perception, such as *see, perceive, notice*.

Towards arriving at reliable interpretations in terms of meanings, the statistical software SPSS 26.0 was used, and a chi-square test was run. This allowed for the comparison of two nominal variables, giving information about the degree of significance of the corresponding associations, ranging from non-significant ($p > .05$), to significant ($p \leq .05$).

The study sought to confirm whether there were significant changes in the use of these representational choices over time, comparing each category from speech 1 with their counterparts from speech 2 (eight months later) and from speech 3 (after fourteen months). On the other hand, each of these representational choices was considered for each individual speech, comparing the clauses with an *I* subject with those with a *We* subject, to account for hypothetically significant choices in which May represented herself as either an individualized or a collectivized social actor. These comparisons yielded a total of fifty-six cross-tabulations between two variables each. Of these, only the significant associations are discussed below.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The distribution of frequencies clearly shows that the use of the collective *We* pronoun significantly outstrips the use of the individualized *I* (see tables 1 and 2 below). There are three times as many uses of, *We* than *I* in the first speech, 3.5 as many in the second speech, and 4.7 as many in the third. These raw data seem to suggest a clear preference for Teresa May projecting herself in the Brexit speeches as part of a group, the British people, rather than as an individualized self, this tendency increasing as we get closer to what was initially held to be the Brexit deadline.

Such an intensifying preference seems to correlate with the unfolding of political events relating to Brexit. In her first speech, after just six months as Prime Minister, having seemingly won the British people's trust as a guarantor of an advantageous resolution to Brexit negotiations, may still holds a strong position, viewed by many as an efficient negotiator. However, her position has deteriorated somewhat by the time of her second speech, coming after the general election of June 8th, 2017, in which she loses support, and when she is thought not to be making progress quickly enough, and further weakened at the time of the third, when the terms she has thus far agreed with the EU are rejected in the UK Parliament. The increasing frequency of *We* at the expense of ever fewer *I*-choices as time unfolds may be interpreted as a preference for presenting herself as part of the British people, where the inclusive *We* assimilates her agency with that of all UK citizens; a strategy, probably, to turn them into the social actors that share May's reality expressed in the clause, an inclusive *We* that dilutes responsibility.

Table 1. Quantifications of representational processes for the three speeches: clauses with *I* subject.

PROCESS	Speech 1 <i>I</i> subject	PROCESS	Speech 2 <i>I</i> subject	PROCESS	Speech 3 <i>I</i> subject
MENTAL (desiderative– <i>want</i>)	17	MENTAL (desiderative– <i>want</i>)	6	MENTAL (desiderative– <i>want</i>)	8
MENTAL (other verbs of volition)	5	MENTAL (other verbs of volition)	2	MENTAL (other verbs of volition)	4
MENTAL (cognitive verbs <i>know, believe, think</i>)	11	MENTAL (cognitive verbs <i>know, believe, think</i>)	13	MENTAL (cognitive verbs <i>know, believe, think</i>)	8
MENTAL (perception)	3	MENTAL (perception)	3	MENTAL (perception)	2
MENTAL (sum of all)	36	MENTAL (sum of all)	24	MENTAL (sum of all)	22
RELATIONAL	12	RELATIONAL	6	RELATIONAL	6
VERBAL	5	VERBAL	7	VERBAL	7
MATERIAL	0	MATERIAL	4	MATERIAL	7

Table 2. Quantifications of representational processes for the three speeches: clauses with *We* subject.

PROCESS	Speech 1 <i>We</i> subj.	PROCESS	Speech 2 <i>We</i> subj.	PROCESS	Speech 3 <i>We</i> subj.
MENTAL (desiderative– <i>want</i>)	15	MENTAL (desiderative– <i>want</i>)	12	MENTAL (desiderative– <i>want</i>)	30
MENTAL (other verbs of volition)	21	MENTAL (other verbs of volition)	9	MENTAL (other verbs of volition)	46
MENTAL (cognitive verbs <i>know, believe, think</i>)	5	MENTAL (cognitive verbs <i>know, believe, think</i>)	6	MENTAL (cognitive verbs <i>know, believe, think</i>)	7
MENTAL (perception)	2	MENTAL (perception)	8	MENTAL (perception)	6
MENTAL (sum of all)	43	MENTAL (sum of all)	35	MENTAL (sum of all)	89
RELATIONAL	17	RELATIONAL	18	RELATIONAL	20
VERBAL	3	VERBAL	7	VERBAL	7
MATERIAL	42	MATERIAL	44	MATERIAL	40

The prominence of mental processes in the data for both *I* and *We* choices is unquestionable, representing the most frequent process type. In fact, the process type lends itself to further specifications, as shown in tables 1 and 2. We may conclude that May's representation of reality is preferably expressed in terms of what she wants, seeks, believes or perceives, projecting a social actor whose agency is primarily related to mental activity. At the other end of the scale, we have the very scant use of verbal processes, again for both *I* and *We* choices, which is interesting, since it implies a clear avoidance of coming across in her role as a speaker, with all the possibilities this might entail, as also would the act of making promises or claims (thus lending truth values to her words). Rather than embracing the function of a communicator, she sees the persuasive potential of her speeches as reaching the audience specifically from her own mental activity.

The manifest difference in the use of material processes is certainly noteworthy; these are represented in the clauses where May projects herself from the *We*-perspective, while being very infrequent when talking as an individual. This is interesting, as material processes turn the agent in subject position into a doer, a performer, the action expressed conveying potential meanings of creation, or at least change. It seems clear that these are elements that May wants to include in her choice of process types (consider the very high frequency of the material process type in table 2), but only from a collective, inclusive, *We*-perspective, turning the British people into co-protagonists of all the possible actions entertained, instead of presenting them as conceived from her individual institutional role as Prime Minister.

To test my hypotheses and confirm whether there were significant changes in May's choice of processes of representation of reality over time, each category from speech 1 was compared with their counterparts from speech 2 (eight months' time difference) and from speech 3 (fourteen months' time difference). A chi-square test was run to confirm the statistical significance underlying the changes in frequencies. Findings showed that *time* (separating the speeches) was a statistically significant variable, but only for specific associations, which will be discussed below.

More significant statistical differences were identified between the first and the third speech than between the first and second. This meaningfulness affects mental processes as a group ($p < .00$) and specifically the subgroups of uses with desiderative *want* ($p < .01$) along with other verbs of volition ($p < .00$) whenever May chooses to project herself from the inclusive *We*-perspective. For the sum of mental processes, the shift is from 43 to 89 occurrences, for desiderative *want* from 15 to 30, and for verbs of volition from 21 to 46. Roughly, after fourteen months' distance from the first speech, May practically doubles these incidences. This is interesting, as she seems to be attaching ever more importance to the inclusive *We*-reference, which integrates the British people, when representing a reality through the lens of the expression of wishes, desired outcomes, and mental processes in general as we approach the Brexit deadline, thus diverting her own individual self from these very mental processes, turning them into expressions of collective interest, thus making her mental activity coincide with that of the UK citizens.

A further aim of this study was to see whether there were significant differences between May's self-portrayal in her speeches, in terms of the choice between an individualized *I* and a collectivized *We*. Since we have seen that the most significant changes relate to the time span of 14 months from the first to the third speech, it makes sense here to focus on these two landmarks in particular.

As for the first speech, there is no incidence of Theresa May's projection in material processes from the *I*-perspective, while there are 42 from the *We*-position ($p < .00$). In the same vein, whereas there are only 5 uses of verbs of volition with an *I*-subject, there are 21 incidences with the collective *We*-subject ($p < .00$). However, the reverse situation pertains for mental processes of cognition, where May clearly prefers to express herself from the individualized *I*-role as opposed to the collective *We*-position (11 versus 5 occurrences) ($p < .01$). Turning to the third speech, we find the same parallelism as far as the choice of verbs of

volition and material processes is concerned, the *We*-pronoun outstripping its singular counterpart (46 versus 4 for verbs of volition; 40 versus 7 for material processes). This is interesting, as it leads to a portrayal of Theresa May as a social actor who is intent on projecting herself in association with the British people when it comes to representing a reality that conveys action, creation, and ultimately change (material process) as well as desired outcomes (mental process-verbs of volition). And, most importantly, she does so not only in her first speech, from a strong position of power, but also in the third, when her role as negotiator has been significantly challenged, indeed diminished, by the UK parliament. Interestingly, in her first speech May does prefer the *I*-perspective when projecting herself as an agent in mental (verbs of cognition) processes, while talking about what she thinks, knows and believes. This individualization, which suggests assertiveness, makes sense in that she delivers her speech from a position of strength. We understand that this is no longer the case in the third speech, where *We* versus *I*-choices are on a par, her power having now become considerably weakened. At this stage, May probably feels insufficiently empowered to embrace as assertive a role as in her first speech.

The third speech also illustrates May's manifest preference for her collective representation through the inclusive *We*-pronoun in mental processes with desiderative *want* (8 occurrences with *I* versus 30 with *We*-pronoun) ($p < .00$), which does not apply in the first speech, where both uses are practically equal. This suggests a significant need on her part to project herself in association with the British people as she approaches the Brexit deadline (close to the third speech), by which time she had begun to receive severe criticism relating to her abilities as a negotiator. Such collectivization in laying out her desires may be understood as a covert means of expressing her wishes as if shared by all the British people, and hence also as a means of having the British people believe that what she desires for Britain is in the group's interest, a group to which she of course belongs as a British citizen. Finally, the third speech also has May present herself from the inclusive *We*-perspective, when we consider the sum of mental processes. With the plural pronoun outnumbering the singular by 89 to 22 incidences ($p < .00$), May shows a clear preference for representing mental processes in general in association with the British people. This trend for the sum of mental processes is not only significant in the third speech itself, but also from the first to the third, the *We*-pronoun increasing from 43 to 89 occurrences across the time span of fourteen months.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Considering the results, our two hypotheses appear to be borne out. The study confirms that there are significant changes between the speeches, affecting the representation of reality revolving around the prospect of a post-Brexit EU-UK trade relationship. Since these stand as landmarks on a timeline that would eventually lead to the British divorce from the EU, we can confirm that *time* has proved to be a significant variable in accounting both for changes in May's representation of reality and for her own projection as a social actor over time, specifically in the 14-month time span separating the first from the third speech. As discussed above, the choices of May's self-projection, either from an individualized *I* or from a collectivized *We*-perspective, also proved to be meaningful.

It is important to contextualize these findings further, as they illustrate interesting aspects of May's strategic speech behaviour against the backdrop of Brexit. We should not lose sight of the fact that the three speeches, when taken together, imply a progressive "erosion" of May's power and reliability as a negotiator. As we move away from the landmark of the first speech (in which she presents herself, the newly appointed conservative leader and Prime Minister, as the renewed promise and hope for a post-Brexit outcome that would optimize Britain's trade relations with the EU) we find an ever more weakened politician. In the second speech she is seen to be under significant pressure, even criticized from within the ranks of her own party for the way in which she conducts negotiations. The third speech, closest in time to the initial deadline for the UK's divorce, finds May in the position of having suffered the outright rejection of the terms she has negotiated with the EU. May's choices of processes in the representation of reality, as encoded in her clause construction patterns, along with the choices she makes in projecting herself as a social actor in agentive position, acquire strategic significance in light of these ongoing political circumstances.

Generally speaking, May was found to rely most importantly on mental processes, the relational and verbal counterparts being the least represented ones. For her persuasive talk, she seems then to attach special value to mental activity, to what is thought, believed, known or wanted. Relying on verbal representations would have made her embrace the role of communicator (e.g., *I say, I tell you, I promise, I can guarantee*), an oratory resource that she does not endow with persuasive effectiveness in the Brexit context. It is also interesting to note how scant relational processes are when we consider their potential, especially taking into account Halliday's (1994) categorization, which includes choices of expressing intensive

(e.g. *We are a proud nation*) or circumstantial processes of being (as in *We are in an advantageous situation*). Again, these identifying processes are not considered by May to carry significant persuasive weight in her speeches.

What is of particular interest in this study is the choice of *I* versus *We*-pronoun made by May in agentive position, and particularly its strategic versatility depending on the process type and the specific speech in which these are used. If we bear in mind that political speeches are thoroughly prepared and linguistically controlled (Schaffner, 1996: 201) then her uses of *I* versus *We*, in combination with specific process types, are anything but random choices, an assertion that has been supported by statistically significant analysis in this study. In general, May has shown a clear preference for projecting herself as part of a group, the British people, encoded in the *We*-pronoun, rather than as an individualized self, most clearly in the third speech, aware as she is that her negotiations are being jeopardized by critical public opinion and members of Parliament. Presenting herself in association with the British people may be interpreted as a strategy of assimilation (Van Leeuwen, 1996: 50), where she steps aside from her role as an individual leader (her capacity of Prime Minister) to become a citizen. This, in turn, may be seen as an attempt to make the British people think that her interests are not her own but those of the British citizens; it might also be understood as a way of sharing or diluting political responsibility. This applies also to material processes in general as well, in which May presents herself in all three speeches much more frequently in association with the British people while referring to implementation of actions in general. Such specific assimilation may imply turning citizens as a group into involved agents as much as to implementing the changes that lie ahead.

Van Leeuwen (1996: 48) observes that, given the great value nowadays placed on individuality in many spheres of society, the categories of assimilation versus individualization are of primary concern in CDA. In the case of May's Brexit speeches, the *I* versus *We* dichotomy has proved meaningful, yet, as discussed above, the most notable significance might in fact be found in the *We*-pronoun itself when used under specific circumstances of the representation of reality. Theresa May's strategic behaviour seems to hinge most crucially on assimilation, rather than on individualization. At times, the collective *We* points to mechanisms of diluting or sharing political responsibility, whereas other instances convey an enhancement of the British people as May's co-protagonists in the implementation of actions or changes. On other occasions, it may be understood as a means of turning May's wishes and desired outcomes into concerns of general interest, making her

mental activity coincide with that of the British people, or having them believe that she subsumes through the collective *We* the British people's concerns as her own. Assimilation could also imply a covert means of expressing her wishes in particular, as if shared by all the British people.

This array of possible meanings contrasts with associations that other researchers have made when accounting for the possible interpretations of pronoun *We* in political speeches. Simon-Vandenberg (1997) and Fairclough (2000) both argue that *We* may express solidarity between the speaker and the audience, understood as a means by which politicians make the addressees feel at one with them. While in May's speeches this assimilation is indeed expressed, solidarity does not seem to apply here. Simon-Vandenberg (1987) and Hillier (2004) allude to the strategic ambiguity behind the use of *We*, in that it may be inclusive or exclusive of addressees and might also be used to conceal or be deliberately ambiguous about the referent. In the samples analyzed in the current study, all clauses with *We* in agentive position have been selected so as to refer to the British people/the UK. Although May is hence never ambiguous about such referents, her *We*-choices may be interpreted as being purposefully ambiguous about *the relation* between referents: thus, through the *We*-reference she may indistinctly convey her endorsement of the British people's interests, or the way in which the British people views coincide with her own. Chilton's (2004) conceptualization of group identity either as insiders or outsiders also applies here. In her manifest preference for the collective, *We* pronoun, May pursues a strong bond between the British people, herself as Prime Minister, and Britain, which are projected as one unit in relation to the European Union, thus maintaining a tension of insiders versus outsiders. Finally, Leung (2018) associates collective *We* with a way of expressing modesty or diverting excessive prominence away from the speaker. While modesty seems implausible, given the findings, May's preference for the plural pronoun (hence not embracing her individual role as Prime Minister) might be understood as a way of toning down her prominent power position and instead placing herself on an equal footing with the British people she represents.

In some respect, May's projection as a *We*-agent resonates with Bull & Strawson's (2020) identification of her equivocal style, which implies a lack of clarity, confusion, or some form of concealment. The former president's *We*-choices can certainly be understood as a way of hiding as a social actor behind a collective group reference. Could our findings be said to uncover a specific style in May's delivery of speeches? I don't think so. We might instead see these as specific to the three seminal speeches delivered in the Brexit context, and as such may be of interest in the study of political oratory or for political scientists. It would

certainly be interesting in future research to test these findings against other speeches she has delivered in other political contexts.

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