

Discursive Construction of Immigration Through the Lens of News Values in the Brexit Referendum

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This paper aims to analyse how immigration was discursively constructed as a newsworthy topic in the UK's quality papers' campaign coverage of the Brexit referendum. To do so, a corpus of four major British broadsheets (The Guardian, The Independent, The Times, and Daily Telegraph) was collected and analysed with a combination of qualitative (Discursive News Values Analysis) and quantitative (Corpus Linguistics) methods. The results show that similar patterns of news values usage appeared in the corpus across the ideological lines (left-right) and Brexit stance (Leave-Remain). Although some dissociation strategies can be observed in the left-wing or Remain backing press, the statistically significant presence of similar linguistic pointers indicates that an anti-immigrant discourse was a salient part of the coverage, even permeating into the left-wing press and the Remain camp's discourse. The adoption and repetition of such narratives could also, by themselves, lead to further acceptance and normalisation of the common anti-immigrant topoi in the broader discourse of Brexit in society, although more research is needed in this regard.

Keywords: Brexit; Immigration; UK press; News Values; Corpus linguistics; DNVA; CADS.

1. Introduction

Immigration was at the heart of the debates during the Brexit referendum. In this paper, I analyse how this topic was discursively constructed in the campaign coverage of British quality papers along ideological lines (left-right) and political stances toward Brexit (Leave-Remain). Evidence shows that during the Brexit referendum, problematic topics such as immigration were used to create sensational coverage (Moore and Ramsay, 2017) and that such topics are interdiscursively connected to each other (Maccaferri 2019).

Some scholars have specifically underlined the racist and xenophobic aspects of the Brexit referendum discourse. Cap's (2017) analyses show that the Brexit discourse of immigration is largely a discourse of uncertainty and ever-growing anxiety, as well as xenophobia and hatred, involving a strong Self-Other distinction and organised ways of othering (Cap 2017, 67). The study's findings show that the media coverage of the discourse of Brexit relied extensively on discursively constructed threat and fear generation mechanisms (Cap 2017, 67). Morrison's (2019) analysis of British print and online newspapers in the weeks before and immediately after the referendum also shows negatively charged framing of migrants as 'invaders' and/or 'exploiters' resurfacing during the height of the referendum coverage. Tudor (2023), by drawing on critical race theory, also argues that in the mediatic discourse of Brexit, a direct line could be drawn between immigration and racism. She defines 'migratism' as ascribing "migration to certain people, constructing them as migrants and discriminating against them" (p. 230). She shows a direct link between this concept and 'racism', 'racialization', and even anti-EU rhetorics in the mediatic debates around Brexit. Other scholars (Cap, 2019; Grinan-Moutinho, 2022) even draw a direct causal link between the persistent anti-immigration discourse of the political coalition for leaving the EU in the years prior to the referendum and its outcomes.

Virdee and McGeever (2018) also underline the role of racism vis-à-vis immigration, specifically in the Leave campaign, and argue that the Leave campaign's victory was indeed due to several racist premises: on the one hand, Leave supporters construct a desire to restore Britain's place as the imperial force and, on the other hand, they represent the picture of an island that is not "British" anymore due to globalisation. Other studies show that the issue of racism during the Brexit referendum was delineated more subtly with certain degrees of individualisation of racism in the public discourse, which could have led to denial and macerating of more widespread systems of white privilege in British society or neglecting racist discourses and articulation that might appear without the overt intention of being racist (Tyler et al., 2022). In another more specific study, Share (2018) offers an analysis of the role of the "migrant figure"

in the British press during the EU referendum debates. The study seeks to shed light on the mechanisms adopted by the British press in the discourse of the referendum debate. He argues that the migrant figure is central, politically charged, and highly mediated. His analysis shows that the British press aimed to capitalise on such polarised political rhetoric. This is also the case in Martins's (2021) analysis of the media coverage of the 'Euro-Ripper' case. Her analysis of the media coverage of this case before the Brexit referendum shows how the news media dramatized the moral panic, mobilising specific compositions of 'otherness' and constructing suspicion and criminalisation of particular social and ethnic groups and nationalities.

Such frames also extend and draw on common juxtapositions to create ideologically loaded frames. Radziwinowiczówna and Galasińska (2021) critical discourse analysis of two Pro-Leave British outlets (The Daily Telegraph and The Daily Mail) on the specific topic of post-Brexit deportability of immigrants shows how the concept of Vile Eastern European immigrants is juxtaposed with a minority of hard-working and tax-paying migrants from the continent, as well as with unjustly deported Windrush and Commonwealth migrants.

All these studies draw upon the intricacies of immigration and common discourses, especially in the media, dominating the scene. Still, at the same time, all this shows the need for further research in this regard. This is especially the case if we consider other studies that indicate a much more complex picture regarding the immigration discourse in the context of Brexit. Dodantenna's (2020) analysis of British regional press shows that most local press coverage of immigrants is positive, demonstrating support and emphasising their contribution and necessity. The threat frame, expressing feelings of dread, terror, stress, and animosity, is also present, but it is generally followed by the aforementioned optimism.

From what has been studied so far in the press discourse of Brexit, it is clear that immigration is a polemical issue, wrapped into discursive constructions, representations, and strategies related to racism and xenophobia. My review of the available studies so far shows that, in particular, two points should be addressed in future studies. First and foremost, the studies in this regard are dominated by the study of the pro-Leave camp and lack a comparative aspect with the pro-Remain discourse. Second, more studies focusing on the British press are necessary as the relative weight of evidence from the British press, especially during the referendum campaign, is not significant compared to the studies done with other texts and the foreign press (Fonn, 2018; Katsambekis & Souvlis, 2018; León-Solís et al. 2018; Martin & Binet, 2018; Zappettini, 2019). Therefore, this paper aims to address this gap by studying how immigration is covered in the pre-referendum campaign coverage of the British press, along ideological lines (Left-Right) and political stances toward Brexit (Leave-Remain).

2. Methodology

2.1. Objective

To analyse the ideological differences in the discursive construction of immigration in the British quality press coverage of the referendum campaign and to compare the differences and similarities along political affiliations (left-right) and ideological stances toward Brexit (Leave-Remain).

2.2. Corpus

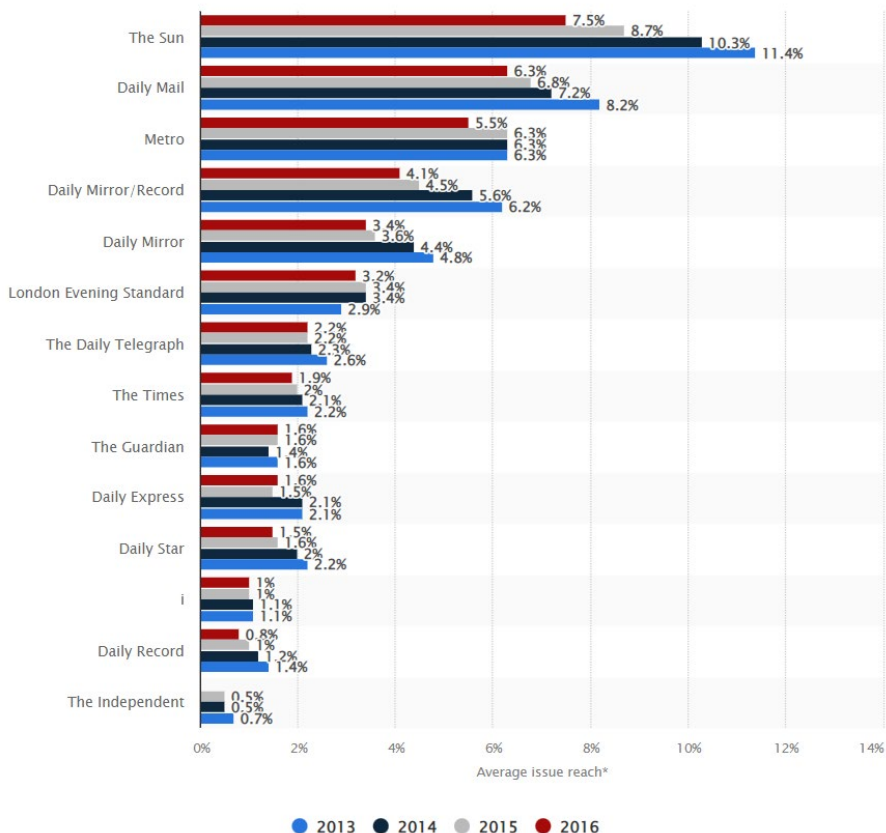
A corpus of four major British broadsheets (The Guardian, The Independent, The Times, and Daily Telegraph) was collected using Nexis UK news databases. The search word used for data retrieval was Brexit. The results were down-sampled by limiting the search timespan [22 February to 23 June 2016], news type [articles], and managing duplicities (i.e., articles repeated in digital and paper editions). The same procedure was used for each daily, resulting in 4 different sub-corpora.

TABLE 1. Corpus description

Newspaper	Political Stance	Brexit Stance	Number of articles	Corpus tokens
The Guardian	Left	Remain	3584	4,549,153
The Independent	Left	Remain	2272	1,709,259
The Times	Right	Remain	1696	1,071,314
Daily Telegraph	Right	Leave	1233	814,048
Total			8785	7,329,726

In the selection of newspapers, a number of different factors were taken into account to ensure maximum representativeness and accuracy. First of all, I considered the newspapers with the most readers and reach according to the readership average issue reach index (Figure 1). Then, I decided to exclude tabloids and regional press because their journalism style significantly differs from national broadsheets. Therefore, the study focused on the main British broadsheets to prevent the effect of a different journalism style on the results.

FIGURE 1. Newspapers ranked by readership average issue reach in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2013 and 2016 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/290086/newspapers-ranked-by-penetration-in-the-united-kingdom/>)



In choosing the broadsheets, I also tried to strike a balance considering two other important factors: traditional political affiliation and their Brexit stance. Therefore, two prominent left-wing newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, and two right-wing broadsheets, *The Times* and *the Daily Telegraph*, were selected for analysis. As for the Brexit stance, three of the above-mentioned newspapers officially backed a Remain vote, while the *Daily Telegraph* was the only one supporting a Leave vote. There was no left-wing broadsheet officially backing a Leave vote.

The coding language R was used to clean and prepare the corpus. R is mostly known for its statistical capacities and has gained popularity within

corpus linguistics in recent years thanks to the introduction of a number of useful packages explicitly designed for this purpose (Gries, 2009). Therefore, after compiling the corpus using Nexis UK, the corpus was cleaned using the R software package (R Core Team, 2013) with the help of tm library (Feinerer and Hornik, 2018). Data cleaning and data wrangling were performed using R software1 (v3.6.1) and tm2 package (v3.6.2). Once the corpus was cleaned, it was saved in a plain text format (TXT) to be imported to other corpus linguistics software (Javadinejad, 2024)

2.3. *Framework and Procedure*

The framework used for this study is CADS (Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies), with a combination of corpus linguistics tools for quantitative analysis and DNVA (Discursive News Values Analysis) for qualitative analysis. Discursive News Values Analysis is a theoretical framework for approaching news values not as inherent properties of the news event but as constructed and communicated through discourse in the news media (Bednarek & Caple 2014; 2017). In this model, nine major news values and their corresponding linguistic devices are listed to explore discursive practices of news media when constructing a certain event as newsworthy: Consonance ([stereo] typical), Eliteness (of high status or fame), Impact (having significant effects or consequences), Negativity/Positivity, Personalisation (having a personal human face), Proximity (geographically or culturally near), Superlativeness (of high intensity/large scope), Timeliness (recent, ongoing, about to happen, new, current, seasonal), Unexpectedness (unexpected). Despite being a relatively new model, DNVA has been received and applied vastly by scholars of media studies in cross-cultural studies (Fruttaldo & Venuti, 2017; Makki 2019; 2020; Maruenda-Bataller, 2021), cross-media analysis (Venuti & Fruttaldo, 2019), in a variety of different journalistic genres and domains (Huan 2016; Molek-Kozakowska 2017; 2018), and recently to specific analyse the news coverage of Brexit (Javadinejad, 2024).

The data analysis procedure followed Baker et al.'s (2008) corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis model, originally used for and adapted to DNVA by Bednarek and Caple (2014; 2017). Combining DNVA with CL analysis is one of the most critical challenges of this specific theoretical framework, which has been pointed out and explored by various scholars so far (Potts et al., 2015; Fuster-Márquez & Gregori-Signes, 2019; Maruenda-Bataller, 2021). I specifically followed Javadinejad's (2024) mixed method procedure for DNVA when applied to a large corpus, which draws on the previous body of research on DNVA and offers a specific corpus-assisted approach for such theoretical

frameworks. Applying this procedure to the present study, I carried out the following steps to analyse the data:

1. The search term of 'immigration' was subjected to collocation analysis. All the collocations in and above the threshold of $MI=3$ were considered statistically significant. An $MI=3$ means a statistical significance of 99%, the generally accepted reference point of significance in quantitative analysis (Brezina 2018, 69). Following Maruenda-Bataller (2021), the statistically significant collocations were considered as potential linguistic pointers for news value usage in the discourse. The concept of linguistic pointer is offered by Maruenda-Bataller (2021) and then adopted by Javadinejad (2024) to overcome the problem of nuance and context-dependent linguistic devices that might be used to construct a specific news value based on the context, co-text, and word prosody around particular search terms/topics.

2. A concordance analysis was carried out, and resulting concordances were qualitatively analysed to code potential pointers into their corresponding news values based on their context and co-text. AntConc was used at this stage, as its collocation and concordance analysis tools are more convenient than the existing tools for the R package, while the R package offers no additional precision in this regard.

3. Using R coding language, for each newspaper/sub-corpus, the distribution of existing news values around immigration was calculated and normalised (per 100) based on the total frequencies of all the pointers coded into a certain news value in the previous step. All the numbers were normalised and tested statistically to ensure the observed differences were statistically significant and, therefore, comparable with each other. The chi-square statistical measure was used for this purpose, as it is the most appropriate measure for the existing data type (tables with different total numbers). Chi-square uses proportions in its formula and, therefore, automatically normalises the difference in corpus size. In addition, it is a non-parametric measure, which means it does not require a normal distribution of data as a presupposition. The result of this block is a table/graph of overall news value usage across the four data sets, which could be reliably compared.

4. The resulting table and graph were then analysed to observe the differences in the distribution of news values, constructing immigration as a newsworthy topic across the four datasets. A number of selected pieces of texts from the coverage were also further analysed to explore specific discursive practices constructing immigration as a newsworthy topic. I use some basic theoretical concepts from the broader field of Critical Discourse Analysis here, including discourse, discursive construction and representation. Here, I specifically use discourse, as defined by (Fairclough, 1989), as the social practice

of using language in a dialectical relation with the context in which language is used and, therefore, also with the broader social structures (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018). As defined by Fairclough, thus, different discourses might be present in relation to various social groups and agents with a “specific set of meanings expressed through particular forms and uses which give expression to particular institutions or social groups” (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018, p. 3). In media and news discourse, particularly, discursive practices are tied with the notion of representation, which is part of the ideational aspect of the discourse and, hence, the materialisation of the ‘social’ event (in this case, the media text or the news story) and its relationship with broader structures and questions of ideology and power. For example, researchers in this field have traditionally dealt with how specific grammatical and lexical choices reflect the ideological preferences of media (Fairclough, 1995, pp. 25-28). In this context, I follow other researchers of the discursive construction of news values (Fuster-Márquez & Gregori-Signes, 2019; Maruenda-Batalle, 2021; Javadinejad, 2024) and analysed how the specific discursive practices of constructing certain topics as newsworthy as materialised in the news story can reveal insights related to representations that the news media offers, and what this specific type of mediated discourse can tell us about the broader structures of ideology and soft power within the society.

3. Results

3.1. Distribution of overall news values

The frequency and distribution of news values for the search term of “immigration” is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. News values frequency (absolute and normal) and Chi-square p-value for the search term of Immigration

Frequency	Guardian		Independent		Times		Telegraph		P-value
	Absolute	Normal	Absolute	Normal	Absolute	Normal	Absolute	Normal	
Negativity	339	64%	145	37.86%	36	55%	22	45%	<0,001
Eliteness	0	0%	16	4.18%	0	0%	0	0%	<0,001
Impact	193	36%	196	51.17%	25	38%	24	49%	<0,001
Positivity	0	0%	26	6.79%	5	8%	3	6%	<0,001
Total Collocations	532	100%	383	100.00%	66	100%	49	100%	

With all the p-values within statistically significant margins, the visual representation of the normalised frequencies of news values is as follows:

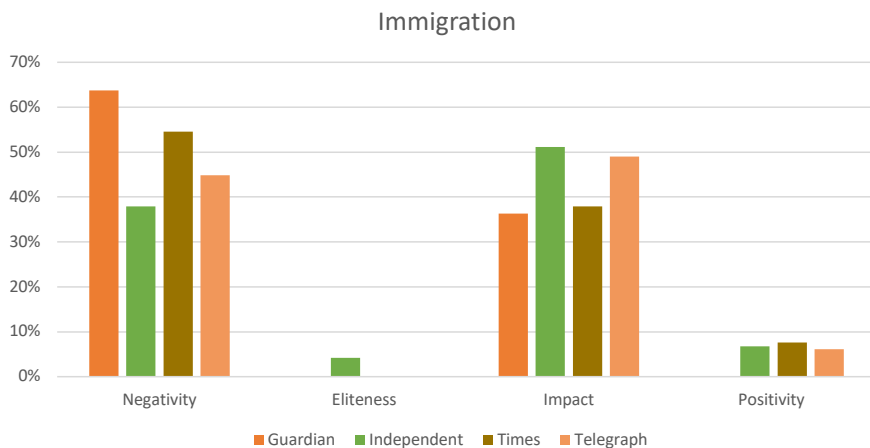


FIGURE 2. Normalised frequencies of news values for the search term of Immigration

At first glance, the pattern of news values used around Immigration is highly similar across the four data sets. First and foremost, the data show a very high presence of Negativity and Impact in all four newspapers, with the left-wing Guardian being on top but closely followed by all the others. Impact is the second most frequent news value, with high numbers for all four sub-corpora. The amount of Positivity is scant, especially in comparison with Negativity, while Eliteness is almost negligible, only present in a very small amount in the Independent. This initial quantitative data already suggest that a Negative and possibly anti-immigration discourse was dominant in Brexit debates, even in Left-wing and Remain backing press. Although it is in line with the previous initial findings (Moore and Ramsay 2017; Maccaferri 2019; Cap 2017), what is shocking and nuance here is that it seems that anti-immigrant discourses were not restricted to Leave backing or Right-wing press. Delving into some textual, in-depth analysis of discursive strategies in the most frequently used news values would probably shed more light on this initial finding.

3.2. Negativity

The data show that the news value of Negativity was pervasive in the construction of immigration. Negativity in the area of immigration was constructed using three main discursive strategies: one set of pointers indicated lack of control (uncontrolled and mass being the most salient collocates). The second group associated immigration with fears and concerns about the future. Finally, the

third group of pointers associated dangers and problems with immigration. In this case, an interesting observation is that the left-wing Guardian was the newspaper that constructed Negativity with the highest frequency. This point might seem counter-intuitive, since the Guardian is generally considered a progressive and pro-immigration newspaper. However, the context in which Negativity is used should be considered, as we will observe some examples further in this section. Other newspapers, however, followed the Guardian very closely in terms of quantity. On the other hand, although the right-wing and pro-Leave Telegraph has similar numbers of Negativity in this semantic field, the range of the strategies used was somehow limited compared to other newspapers (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Linguistic pointers of Negativity for Immigration across strategies and newspapers

Strategies in the news value of Negativity	The Guardian	The Independent	The Times	The Telegraph
Lack of control	uncontrolled mass illegal cut (being necessary)	uncontrolled mass	uncontrolled mass	
Fears and concerns	concerns concern concerned fears fear	concerns concerned	concern concerns fears	concern concerns
Danger and problems	terrorism issue issues	linking (to a problem/danger) issue issues	issue	Trap issue

In examining the contexts of these Negative constructions in the three pro-Remain newspapers, one crucial caveat should be mentioned. In many cases, the negative pointers appear in the quotes from the pro-Leave figures, sometimes even used in the discourse of the newspaper with the intention of debunking or at least casting doubt on them. The following excerpts containing the phrase ‘uncontrolled immigration’ illustrate this point:

Excerpt 1: The Guardian, May 12, 2016, Thursday

[Public consent is key in immigration debate, says Boris Johnson]

“We’re not going to have **uncontrolled immigration**, but we’re not going to get into the situation of how many and by when - that depends on the system you bring in. What you don’t have is increases of the scale that we’ve seen in the past few years.”

In this example, the Guardian just quotes Boris Johnson on the matter without showing great empathy or support for his discourse. Although he is saying ‘we’re NOT going to have uncontrolled immigration’, his discourse is still highly anti-immigrant. The news story is devoid of any other news values or linguistic resources to construct strong support for his discourse. Therefore, it can be said that in this case, Eliteness might be used to create distance with a discourse rather than an endorsement.

In the other left-wing pro-Remain newspaper, similar quotes are present that legitimise and normalise the representation of immigration as uncontrolled:

Excerpt 2: The Independent (United Kingdom), June 19, 2016, Sunday

[Why I’m Out: To be against the EU is not to be against Europe]

“One can be passionately in favour of a multi-cultural society and immigration, but passionately against **uncontrolled immigration**”.

In other examples, even such quotes were used to debunk the claim, such as the following excerpt from the Times:

Excerpt 3: The Times (London), May 28, 2016, Saturday, Edition 1; National Edition.

[‘If we lose, Brussels will try to make us more like them at every chance’]

The woman who wants to replace Nigel Farage says that a vote for Remain will not be final, Rachel Sylvester writes: “I certainly have cultural concerns. There is a risk from **uncontrolled immigration** that we start to lose our heritage, that it somehow **dilutes our culture**. What was great about Immigration in the past was that people would assimilate. The trouble is it’s **so uncontrolled now that people don’t need to integrate**.”

The news story is a piece that is critical of Nigel Farage’s take on Brexit, and the Excerpt containing the collocation of ‘uncontrolled immigration’ is a quote from him. In the quotation, a highly anti-immigration discourse can be observed. Apart from the collocation detected by CL analysis (‘uncontrolled immigration’), other pointers also construct a high level of Negativity, representing a profoundly anti-immigration discourse (‘we start to lose our heritage’, ‘dilutes our culture’, ‘so uncontrolled now that people don’t need to integrate’). Although these

pointers do not appear in CL analysis, they all add to the layers of Negativity by constructing different anti-immigration discourses regarding its economic and cultural aspects. It should be mentioned here that my analysis confirms Potts et al.'s (2015) and Maruenda-Bataller's (2021) indication of the limitations of adopting CL for news values analysis, especially to the fact that news value analysis might not lend itself well to analysis of large corpora. However, this example shows that sometimes the presence of certain pointers explored via collocations analysis can be an indication of the existence of specific discourses constructed on the broader text.

What should be noted in these instances is that contrary to the above-mentioned underlying tone, such talking points in these examples are repeated and reproduced in high frequencies across the discourse and, therefore, could probably play in favour of normalising and naturalising them. This becomes more noteworthy and salient if we consider the discursive construction of immigration in the Leave backing Telegraph. Contrary to the other three, the tone Telegraph adopts to represent immigration is much more subtle. A phrase that the Telegraph uses in many cases is the 'issue of immigration'. This collocation has a negative tone, but at the same time, it is much smoother and constructs Negativity less explicitly:

Excerpt 4: The Daily Telegraph (London), June 14, 2016, Tuesday, Edition 1; Scotland

[Boost for Leave camp as it takes poll lead]

Brexit opens one-point gap over Remain among those who are certain to vote: "The Leave campaign has in recent days focused on **the issue of Immigration** – in particular, the **number of foreigners who could come to the UK if Turkey becomes a member of the EU**.

The news story revolves around the 'issue of immigration', which has a negative overtone to it by discussing immigration as "an issue". In addition, in this instance, Immigration is also constructed in terms of Impact, through the hypothetical future 'could come ...if', and even Superlativeness through reference to quantity in 'number', regarding the possible future hypothetical outcomes on the voters, underlining the 'number of foreigners who could come to the UK if Turkey becomes a member of the EU'. Therefore, the Telegraph constructs Negativity in a more subtle way than other newspapers, as observed in terms of the normalised frequencies and the discursive strategies discussed above.

3.3. Positivity

As expected, the amount of Positivity constructed for Immigration was scant and limited to very few straightforward pointers such as 'good' and 'benefits'.

TABLE 4. Linguistic pointers to Positivity in Immigration

Newspaper	The Guardian	The Independent	The Times	The Telegraph
Linguistic pointers to the news value of Positivity		good	good	benefits

Excerpt 5: The Daily Telegraph (London), March 1, 2016, Tuesday, Edition 1; National Edition.

[Brexit scares over jobs and investment are fallacies]
citizens know the economic **benefits of sensibly managed Immigration**, have always welcomed foreigners and have been generous to refugees.”

Even in these rare cases, Positivity is constructed around a modified notion of immigration: a ‘sensibly managed’ one. The pro-Leave Telegraph conveyed very little Positivity in the area of immigration, and even the very few instances were modified and downgraded. The title is also demonstrative of the type of discourse the Telegraph uses around topics such as ‘jobs’ and ‘investment’ when discussing Brexit. In the title, ‘Brexit scares’ are described as ‘fallacies’ in a piece that indicates citizens do not have a problem with a ‘sensibly managed immigration’. This once again shows how a specific pointer can help detect and explore existing layers of discourses present in each news story, especially in mapping the cultural world and discourses around a certain topic (Fruttaldo & Venuti 2017).

This is not restricted to the pro-Leave and right-wing Telegraph. Even in the pro-Remain and left-wing Independent, Positivity around Immigration is constructed with caution:

Excerpt 6 The Independent (United Kingdom), June 22, 2016, Wednesday

Xenophobia has become the new normal - and these **poisonous ideas** won’t go away after the referendum]

There is genuine and understandable concern about Immigration in Britain. It is not racist to be concerned about Immigration. But **Immigration is good for Britain** and it is the job of politicians to lead.

In this excerpt, Positivity is conveyed with the notion that immigration is good for Britain. However, in the co-text, it can be observed that the newspaper is being cautious not to go too far. Although in the title we can see significant intensifiers against an anti-immigration discourse (‘Xenophobia’ and ‘poisonous ideas’), later in the news text, the Positivity is somehow diluted in tone by statements before and after the core phrase of ‘immigration is good for Britain’.

First, it is said that being concerned about immigration does not make one a racist, and then it is underlined that ‘it is the job of politicians to lead’, probably another way of putting ‘sensibly managed immigration’.

3.4. Impact

The Impact usage patterns in the newspapers seem largely similar to each other in quantitative terms. In the case of Impact alongside Immigration, it is not the mere fact of constructing immigration as impactful in general or mentioning the forecasts and promises about the level of immigration, but it is rather the negative way in which immigration is constructed throughout the corpus, without any meaningful difference between left and right, or pro-Leave and pro-Remain newspapers. The main pointers indicating the construction of immigration as impactful are shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5. Linguistic pointers to Impact in Immigration

Newspaper	The Guardian	The Independent	The Times	The Telegraph
Linguistic pointers to the news value of Impact		net		increases
	forecast	system		scale
	continues	higher	levels	levels
	increased	rise	level	due
	impact	figures	because	level
	make	impact		impact
		down		figures

In general, it seems that the use of Impact for Immigration follows a similar pattern along different political affiliations and ideological stances. The data suggest that the tone of the coverage is set by an anti-immigrant discourse in which the major talking points against immigration are generally accepted and normalised. Left-wing and pro-Remain papers shy away from conveying a positive message around immigration and try to be cautious about the issue. The following excerpts from the left-wing newspapers about the Impact of Immigration are illustrative:

Excerpt 7: The Guardian, June 2, 2016, Thursday

[UK cannot and must not close borders to EU workers, says Corbyn]
Some voters had understandable concerns about the impact of Immigration.

Although the whole news story is in defence of immigration, the tone is downplayed considerably; the concerns about the Impact of Immigration are depicted as ‘understandable’. The whole item also uses Eliteness by quoting Corbyn, which, considering the left-wing tendency of the Guardian, could be interpreted as a source of authority rather than distancing from his position. Considering the very tenuous Positivity constructed in the discourse of the Guardian around immigration, such a conclusion seems justified. Such tacit legitimisation of the concerns over immigration can also be observed in the Independent:

Excerpt 8: The Independent (United Kingdom), June 10, 2016 Friday

[EU referendum: Voters should blame government cuts instead of Immigration] He [David Miliband] said he did not dismiss voters concerns about the **impact of Immigration**, but [...] I think it [the problem of NHS] is because we have a Conservative government that isn’t addressing these problems.

These, however, are not the only ways of representing the Impact of Immigration with a negative tone. In other cases, even more direct references to such matters can be observed. This is the case of the following news story in the Guardian, which directly quotes a Brexiteer.

Excerpt 9: The Guardian, June 21, 2016, Tuesday

[EU referendum: what’s on the minds of voters?]

Exam Brighton’s remainers saw a typical Brexiter as right-wing, nationalist and perhaps xenophobic. “All I keep thinking is people saying ‘back in the day’,” said one. Knowsley’s leavers, however, saw Brexiter as “brave”, and **concerned about the Impact of Immigration on public services**.

That is not to say the Guardian endorsed such discourse. Even this piece seems like a balanced review and a report of what people actually said about Brexit on both sides. However, it should be noted that the discussed patterns of news values construe certain discourses around immigration, especially when they repeatedly appear in the discourse.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Certain observations are worth highlighting regarding the discourses underlying the representation of the topic of immigration in the coverage. In the discursive construction of immigration as a newsworthy topic during the Brexit referendum campaign, a very high level of Negativity can be observed, shared by the right-wing and left-wing and Leave and Remain backing newspapers similarly. What

makes the discursive construction of this semantic field distinctive is that the high level of Negativity is also accompanied by a shallow level of Positivity and a high level of Impact. This suggests that probably most of the discursive construction of immigration was done in terms of negative Impact, that is to say, adopting two news values to construct an enhanced and hybrid sense of newsworthiness around this topic. Although specific differences can be seen in how immigration is portrayed in the pro-Leave vs pro-Remain outlets when analysing the news stories in-depth, the similarities and the volume of taken-for-granted assumptions in this regard are salient. For example, Negativity is rampant in this area across the outlets, Positivity is scant in all four newspapers, and Impact seems to be used in similar patterns in the pro-Remain and pro-Leave sides, accepting and sometimes legitimising common assumptions on the negative impacts of immigration in their discourse.

This is clearly in line with previous findings in the literature that described the tone of the campaign as acrimonious and divisive (Moore and Ramsay 2017, 25-27), McDonald's (2017, 323) conclusion that Brexit discourse was marked by 'anxiety' over issues such as identity and immigration, and Morrisons's (2019) results showing the resurfacing of negatively charged frames regarding immigration. Other studies also found a high level of association between Brexit and negative frames, including 'danger' (Higgins et al. 2018), 'disaster', and 'crisis' (Samuel-Azran and Galily 2018, 297). The findings of this study show that the dominant discourses seemed to be practically similar both in quantitative and qualitative terms. The pro-Remain newspapers appeared to fail to create a different message from the anti-immigrant message of the pro-Leave campaign by following the same strategies, in many cases unintentionally repeating and, in a way, possibly legitimising the same tenets. Phrases such as 'mass immigration' or 'uncontrolled immigration' permeated even into the discourse of left-wing media that traditionally used to be the champions of immigration and immigrants' and refugees' human rights.

It should be noted that this process of legitimization and saliency of the discourse occurs in two ways. First, there seems to be a degree of normalisation about the anti-immigrant discourse. That is to say, the progressive media, in many cases, ultimately accept the very premises of the debate set by anti-immigrant and populist discourse and then merely try to mitigate the consequences. In many of the analysed news stories the negative impact of immigration on public services was technically accepted as an underlying fact. This comes quite close to the notion of 'liquid racism' coined by Weaver (2011; 2016) and recently shown to be in motion even in seemingly pro-immigration discourses (Tsakona et al., 2020) in which, contrary to the attempt at refuting aggression or general stereotypes against migrants, discursive practices end up naturalising and

reproducing assimilative monoculturalist ideologies. In the same line, Tyler, et al. (2022) touch upon a related issue in the broader public discourse of Brexit and warn against the individualisation of racism under the characteristics formulated to constitute leaver and remainer 'kinds of people'. Such discursive practices and articulation contain an individualisation of racism to a property of particular 'kinds of people' and therefore displaces critical reflection on the reproduction of white privilege that is reproduced unintentionally without being blatantly racist.

The second way such premises become part of the dominant media discourse is by what could be called perpetuating discourse. That is to say, in many cases, the pro-remain or left-wing media try to dismantle some of the arguments of the pro-leave camp. However, in doing so, they actually repeat or even finally accept the same talking points to the degree that they become part of an apparently legitimate discussion on the topic. As pointed out by Beckett (2016), in the case of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election, for populist discourse, there is no such thing as bad publicity. That is to say, even if the talking points are repeated to be dismantled in the coverage, their sheer large-scale repetition practically contributes to perpetuating them and, therefore, to the normalisation and acceptance of such debates in the discourse by giving them higher publicity. In these cases, regardless of the stance or even tone of the larger context of the news outlet, after a certain threshold, the mere repetition of the same structures becomes discursively significant in a way that the specific area of discourse is constructed with the same news values. When a set of collocates express similar meanings or discursive functions and occur across numerous contexts, the existence of a common representation or a hegemonic discourse can be concluded (Baker and Levon, 2015, 330-331). This is particularly noteworthy if put under the broader umbrella of discourse and social change, specifically the dialectical relationship between language use and the social settings within which different discourses materialise (Fairclough, 1992; 2007), in which discourses as social practices are in a dialectical relationship with the broader society, with social structures affecting discourse and discourse affecting social structure (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018, p. 2). These questions go beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be noted that other studies show a certain continuity of the elements of the above-discussed discourses not only in the media but in the concrete perception of their audiences pre and post-Brexit referendum and their reflection in citizen voices (Guerra, 2019).

The same could be claimed when immigration was associated with Negativity or Impact. This is mainly in line with previous research that describes the pro-Remain campaign discourse as dispassionate and spiritless (Buckledee, 2018). That is to say, instead of making a compelling case for remaining in the EU, the pro-Remain media seemed to be engaged in dismantling pro-Leave talking points

about Brexit. The language and discourse of pro-Leave media were described as racist and xenophobic by previous research (Cap, 2017; Virdee et al., 2018), but the share of pro-Remain media in the broader normalisation and acceptance of such concepts and discursive practices is an area that could be investigated further in the future. Other long-term studies have already shown that there has been a shift toward the harmonization of the left and right British press media regarding Euroskeptical and anti-immigration discourses (Balch & Balabanova, 2017). Scholars such as Morrison (2019) ascribe such shifts in the media discourse to the changes in the nature of public debate, which eventually reframe the media's narrative preoccupations. All this indicates that maybe it is no longer relevant to produce dyadic, binary, dual analyses of right vs. left, as such ideological underpinnings are diluted in news reports. On the other hand, analysing ideology should perhaps be left for the exclusive analysis of OP-ED texts because these are the sections in which the most direct ideological stances of the outlets are manifested.

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