Negotiating "intervention": Shifting signifiers in the UK's response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria[1].

Introduction

The following contribution examines the articulation of meanings around the key signifier "*intervention*" during the first UK parliamentary debate (21 August 2013) on the appropriate response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Combining Fairclough & Fairclough's (2012) framework for Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) with core concepts from Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory, the contribution develops a novel methodology for mapping shifts in the network of meanings that key signifiers enter into (following Laclau & Mouffe) as a function of the strategic uses to which they are put in real-time political argumentation (following Fairclough & Fairclough). This dual perspective is seen as representative of discursive change in general and the slow change of the system as the effect of countless interpersonally and materially situated instances. Certain contexts, however, such as intense political debate, can act as a crucible in which discursive shifts are magnified and accelerated in ways that make the processes and mechanisms more susceptible to analysis. In the words of Reisigl & Wodak (2001: 32), politicians and their discourse:

…are best seen both as shapers of specific public opinions and interests and as seismographs that reflect and react to the atmospheric anticipation of changes in public opinion and on the articulation of changing interests of specific social groups and affected parties.

The political debate surrounding the use of chemical weapons in Syria and the legitimacy of intervention as a response provides just such a context, particularly given the legacy of previous acrimonious debates around weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the material aftermath of these. Popular protests against the Assad regime Syrian revolution began on 26 February 2011 as one example of the calls for political reform during the 'Arab Spring', and up until the time of the vote Syria had become increasingly violent with many Syrian civilians suffering from the conflict in the region. Many cities and villages had been bombed and destroyed (The Guardian, 11 February 2016) and more than 4.9 million Syrian civilians, a third of the whole population, had become refugees in neighbouring countries (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Kailah 2015). As a consequence of the increasing numbers of refugees and the distressing situation of the Syrian people, international efforts were made to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian civil war, including the Geneva conferences where international organisations such as the United Nations and Arab League sought to act as neutral brokers between the Syrian regime and opposition groups (BBC, 22 January 2014).

The work presented in this contribution compares the speeches to Parliament by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the leader of the opposition, Ed Miliband, before the vote on possible military intervention by UK forces as part of a wider United Nations. Of specific interest, therefore, are the different meanings that attach to '*intervention*' as a floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 113), as a function of its collocation with other signifiers and the strategic uses to which it is put within the rhetorical structure of the speeches. To capture this interplay of semantic and strategic shift, the authors combine Fairclough & Fairclough's (2012) approach to argumentation with Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory and the political contestation of key signifiers. To do so we

extend Fairclough & Fairclough's approach to account for rhetorical structure not only in terms of *normativity* (i.e. the logical sequencing of the argument), but also of *performativity*, as Cameron and Miliband actively construct their arguments around current conceptions of '*intervention*' and seek to recalibrate and fix these (for the current political moment at least). Such a process involves the articulation (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 105) of different semantic elements as each side attempts to construe intervention as a coherent and ideologically persuasive concept in accordance with their own goals and political beliefs. The analysis demonstrates core areas of overlap between the construals of '*intervention*' by the two politicians, but also important distinctions that draw on and develop the indeterminacies of '*intervention*' as a 'floating signifier'. In this way, the present contribution tries to capture the interrelations between (changes in) the representation of '*intervention*' by the political leaders, not only in terms of the networks of lexical relations created around this key signifier, but also in terms of the way these meanings are used strategically at different stages of the speeches and their functions with respect to the speech as a whole.

In the following section we provide a sketch of the wider context of the Syrian crisis and the use of chemical weapons and outline the local context of the UK parliament with regard to international intervention. We then briefly discuss relevant discourse analytical approaches to political debates, with a specific focus on Fairclough & Fairclough's (2012) approach to argumentation structures and Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) work on empty signifiers, before presenting our own methodology and analysis, drawing on and developing both these approaches.

Background of the article and the context of the vote

The vote in Parliament from which the two speeches analysed come were called in response to events in 'Syria and the use of chemical weapons'. In the period leading up to the vote in UK parliament, the Assad regime had been countering opposition by preventing the delivery of aid to various sites and bombing areas under opposition control (BBC, 16 January 2015). On 21 August 2013, the Assad regime used chemical weapons against

civilians around Damascus (BBC, 16 January 2015; The Guardian, 11 February 2016), an act which is against international law and common humanitarian ideals and so led to a significant negative shift in the representation of the Assad regime within the international community. As President Obama stated: "The situation profoundly changed…on August 21st, when Assad's government gassed to death over a thousand people, including hundreds of children" (Washington Post, 10 September 2013). Eight days after the use of chemical weapons by Assad, the House of Commons met to discuss possible UK military intervention in Syria. The Government motion stated that 'a strong humanitarian response is required from the international community and that this may, if necessary, require military action…'. The debate ended with a vote against taking military action in Syria. The Ayes were 220 while the Noes were 332. The speeches of Prime Minister (David Cameron) and the Opposition Leader (Ed Miliband) in this debate are the main data for this paper.

At the time of the debate on the Syrian crisis, there was an elephant in the debating chamber in the form of Tony Blair's role in previous '*intervention*' in Iraq, the lack of international consensus around this and Blair's manipulative use of information provided by the "dodgy dossier" in drumming up support for the intervention, most notably the claim that Iraq had or could have the capacity to strike in 45 minutes. Blair's construal of the need for an urgent response on this occasion blurred the boundaries between military and humanitarian intervention (Milne, 2012) and the subsequent discrediting of the evidence on which this was justified led to a general vilification of Blair both in the press and across the general public and contributed to an increased level of scepticism towards politicians in general and towards the need for intervention in foreign affairs (see Chilcot 2016 for the official damning legal verdict on the debate and the intervention). Though neither politician refers directly to these events in the speeches analysed, there are clear indications that they are aware of their lasting repercussions while the negotiations over the meaning of '*intervention*' continue to vacillate between the humanitarian and the military aspects of such actions. This real-time process of negotiation and reconstrual is the focus of the

present contribution and in the following section we set out the methodology in greater detail.

Dealing with Political Discourse Analysis

Research on political discourse analysis is vast and draws on a diverse range of methodologies, including several adaptations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for analysing political discourse[2] (e.g. Chilton, 2004; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; van Dijk, 1997, 2003, 2008a, 2008b, Wodak, 2004, 2009). These approaches within CDA adopt different perspectives towards Political Discourse Analysis (PDA), such as the social, textual, cognitive and historical aspects, and hence prioritise different aspects of analysis (see Wodak & Meyer, 2009, for a general overview of CDA approaches). According to Fairclough & Fairclough (2012), however, there is a gap in many CDA approaches in that analysts do not deal with PD as a process of logical argumentation. They therefore propose a framework that is more appropriate for the analysis of political argumentation in response to political crises as it provides a basis for critiquing debates in terms of the normative rules of logical discussion.

As a starting point, Fairclough & Fairclough (2012: 79) suggest that there are two fundamental approaches to critical PD analysis: the *normative*, which refers to the evaluation of social practices and beliefs as objectively good or bad, beneficial or harmful, etc.; and the *explanatory*, which investigates 'why social realities are as they are, and how they are sustained or changed'. Developing their critiques of the socio-cognitive and discourse historical approaches, they argue that CDA, with its emphasis on the distribution and effects of power relations and its relative neglect of argumentation structures, cannot by itself investigate these two characteristics of normativity and explanation. Fairclough & Fairclough's approach therefore seeks to combine CDA with argumentation theory to move

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[2] In the context of this contribution, the term *political discourse* is used to refer to the discourses represented by institutions such as parliamentary debate and press discourse. We agree with Fairclough & Fairclough (2012) in assuming that any social discourse can be in some extent political.

beyond what they see as mere descriptions of PD and to provide instead detailed analysis of the normative values of PD as situated argument.

In this contribution we draw on the framework developed by Fairclough & Fairclough (2012) in order to map out the logical structure of the two speeches and the logical relation between various elements and sections; however, we argue that in focusing on the *normative* aspects of arguments and a consideration of whether they are rational and valid, Fairclough & Fairclough have neglected the *performative* element: i.e. the use of popular tropes, affiliation strategies and lay understandings of complex events as elements within the structured argumentation of their contributions to ongoing debates. In this way, we take on board Fairclough & Fairclough's call for a more elaborate analysis of argumentation but with the goal of explaining not whether the argument can be considered good or rational but why such a performance might have been effective at a particular time before a particular audience and according to the precepts of subjective, contingent and partial judgment of what is right and wrong. Specifically, in the terms of this paper, we can build on Fairclough & Fairclough's (2012) approach to analyse what beliefs, values and concepts are used within the arguments of different speakers and in particular how *'intervention'* as a signifier is both strategically drawn on and continually redefined as both an input and output of this process.

Fairclough (2005: 42) in his earlier work discusses the analysis of responses to a political crisis, and the emergence of new discourses around material events. Drawing on Jessop (2002), and Harvey (1996), he applied "four moments of the dialectics of discourse: emergence, hegemony, recontextualization, operationalization" to analyse Blair's speeches over the period 1999-2002. Of particular interest for this paper is the concept of "*emergence*" as the process by which complex realities can be translated into new discourses by articulating elements of existing discourses. For example, the roots of the discourse of "globalization" as it emerged at the end of the last century can be traced back to a variety of related discourses which developed relatively discretely over several centuries but which were articulated at this point as a response to both the material and ideological discursive conditions of the time. This conception of emergence is thus linked

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to Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory and the articulation of previously unconnected discursive elements as moments in a coherent *imaginary*, or ideological and potentially hegemonic whole, as discussed in the following section.

Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory

The changing meaning of signifiers is a central aspect of Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) neo-Gramscian and post-Saussurian (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002) theoretical-analytical approach to hegemonic control and the role of discursive processes in creating alignments and antagonisms between social blocs. There are significant theoretical contrasts between CDA and Laclau & Mouffe's theory, particularly with regard to the role of material structures in shaping and constraining discursive formations, however, and while we ultimately agree with the CDA position that "both the production and the consumption of symbolic systems (orders of discourse, etc.) are over-determined by a range of factors that are more or less extra-semiotic" (Fairclough, Jessop & Sayer n/d: 22; Bartlett, Montessori and Lloyd, forthcoming), we consider that several of the key concepts of Laclau & Mouffe's theory can be rearticulated within a CDA-oriented approach.

According to Laclau & Mouffe (1985), hegemonic power is always contingent as the system of discursive meanings that sustain it can never reach a state of *closure* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 110) as discourses are always open to alien *elements*, signs whose meaning has not been fixed by the discourse. These concepts are irreconcilable with the existing social order and hence provoke a restructuring of the web of signifiers that maintain that order as it strives to accommodate the alien elements as *moments*, signifiers whose meanings have been fixed within an (always contingently) articulated system of meanings. From this perspective, *discourse* is conceived of as the attempt to fix a web of meanings within a particular domain, and within individual discourses *nodal points* are those signifiers around which the web of discourse is woven. These nodal points cannot possess a density of meaning by themselves but acquire signification through their correlation to other signs. As such a nodal point is an *empty signifier*; 'a pure signifier

without the signified' (Žižek, 1989: 97), while a*rticulation* refers to "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 105). It follows from this that the articulation of elements as moments within a discourse simultaneously fixes a web of meanings (if only temporarily) while altering the meanings of the very elements that comprise it. When moments are successfully articulated in the popular imagination, concepts such as democracy and freedom, marriage and the law, act as *social imaginaries*, or those "horizon[s] in which any social demand has been inscribed" (Laclau, 1990: 62-4) – i.e. the ideological concepts that motivate our actions at a deep and often unconscious level. In this paper we consider the elements/moments that are strategically employed by the two speakers to construe '*intervention*' as one nodal point within contested notions of democracy and international law. The need for such contestation and in such a crucible was brought about, we argue, as a result of Blair's '*intervention*' in Iraq and its place in the mediated popular imagination, a context which can be seen as provoking the *dislocation* Torfing (1999: 301) of previous articulations of '*intervention*'[3].

Laclau and Mouffe's approach can thus be combined with Fairclough & Fairclough's argumentation-based approach to consider how the use of key signifiers within specific stages of the argument contributes to the strategic emergence and contestation of new imaginaries and hegemonic dispositions.

Methodology

Data and the nature of the debate

The data analysed was taken from the website of the House of Commons[4]. The page contains a video recording of the whole debate and a transcription of the four parts of the

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[3] Similarly, in the wider project the first author will compare the changes of the meaning of '*intervention*' in the vote analysed in this contribution with a second a vote about UK *intervention* against ISIL in Syria, the change in material circumstances in Syria will perturb the system of meaning relations that comprise *intervention*.

[4] The data is accessible at http://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2013/august/commons-debate-on-syria/.

data: The Government motion, The Opposition amendment, Cameron's speech and Miliband's speech (though there are some minor differences between the video recording and the transcripts). It is important to consider the difference between the motions as written discourse and the debates as spoken discourses and how this bears on analysis.

As a combination and balancing of several arguments by the speakers, the data in this article belongs to the genre of *deliberation*, "an argumentative genre in which practical argumentation is the dominant mode of argumentation" (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012:13). The focus of this contribution is on specific speeches within the consideration of the general context of the whole debate. Within the speeches of Cameron and Miliband, there are several overlaps in the debate, which are either comments or questions by some MPs to the main speaker. These overlaps are considered within the analysis of the speeches.

The practical reasoning approach

Figure 1 is adopted from Fairclough & Fairclough (2012: 44) to show the meaning and hypothetical structure of the core elements of an argument as considered from the perspective of practical reasoning. These can be summarised as:

Action A might enable the agent to reach his goal (G), starting from his circumstances (C), and in accordance with certain values (V), leads to the presumptive claim that he ought to do A.

Fairclough & Fairclough (2012: 44).

As Fairclough & Fairclough (2012: 44) go on to say: "It is often the case that the context of action is seen as a 'problem' (and is negatively evaluated in view of the agent's existing values or concerns), and the action is seen as the solution that will solve the problem.'

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│                  ┌──────────────────────────────┐                     │
│                  │ CLAIM FOR ACTION: Agent       │                     │
│                  │ (presumably) ought to do A    │                     │
│                  └──────────────────────────────┘                     │
│                                                                         │
│   ┌────────────────────┐  ┌────────────────────┐  ┌─────────────────┐ │
│   │ GOAL (G): Agent's  │  │ CIRCUMSTANCES      │  │ MEANS-GOAL      │ │
│   │ goal is a future   │  │ (C): Agent's       │  │ (M-G): Action A │ │
│   │ state of affairs G │  │ context of action  │  │ is the means    │ │
│   │ ...                │  │ ...                │  │ ...             │ │
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CLAIM FOR ACTION: Agent (presumably) ought to do *A*

GOAL (G): Agent's goal is a future state of affairs *G* in which agent's actual concerns or Agent's value commitments are realized.

VALUES (V): Agent is actually concerned with the realization of *V*, or Agent ought to be concerned with the realization of *V* (*V* designates Agent's actual concerns or Agent's value commitments).

CIRCUMSTANCES (C): Agent's context of action is composed of the following relevant facts: (a) natural facts; (b) social institutional facts, e.g. Agent's value commitments (e.g. duties, promises, socially recognised (moral) values and norms.

MEANS-GOAL (M-G): Action *A* is the means that will (presumably) take the agent from *C* to *G* in accordance with *V*.

Figure 1: Fairclough & Fairclough's (2012) proposal of the structure of practical arguments

This framework assumes the following considerations:

- Elements of an argument are coordinated and linked together. Therefore, in many situations, the elements of an argument in the speech have blurred boundaries so that it can be difficult to make a clear distinction between the starting and ending point for each premise.

- The difference between *circumstantial values* as a sub-premise under the *circumstances*, and *values* as a separate premise is not always straightforward. The first type (*circumstantial values*) include social mores and institutional facts, such as 'legality' or a specific legal code, while *values* as a separate premise refer to the personal concerns of the arguer.[5]

- The *Means-Goal* premise is the conclusion that would show the action is the right means to solve the problems or achieve the goals. However, in this contribution, we add to the *means-goal* any sub-action that can be regarded as a part of the main action because the sub-actions can work as premises to support the claim and as the means to achieve the goals.

- There are additional optional elements to the practical argument within the analysis. Some of these were used by Fairclough & Fairclough (2012) in their case studies; some others we have developed within this contribution as necessary analytical elements in the reconstruction of the arguments in the speeches, as we will see in the analysis.

- Some sections of the speeches can be said to represent two elements simultaneously. For example, 'For my part, I think the most likely possibility is that Assad has been testing the boundaries. At least 14 uses and no response—he wants to know whether the world will respond to the use of these weapons…'. This example shows the explicit presentation of circumstances and the implicit presentation of negative consequences of a counter-claim. We identify such ambivalent stages according to the dominant element: in this case, circumstances.

- As a final point, it is worth noting that as the data for this contribution comes from a single debate it is not possible to see how the meaning of '*intervention*' shifts over longer timescales, an area that is considered in more depth in the first author's thesis.

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[5] Fairclough & Fairclough (2012: 192-197) provide an example of the values by showing how 'the government ought to be concerned with justice as fairness'. In the case of this article, we regard reference to the 'national interest' and protecting international law as the main values provided by Cameron because they are represented as a personal preference.

Analysing the debate

This section will present the analyses of four parts of the debate: The Government Motion, the Opposition Amendment, Cameron's speech and Miliband's speech. We will start by providing a general overview capturing the main tensions between the Government Motion (GM) and Opposition Amendment (OA). The GM is discussed before the speech of the Prime Minister, and the OA before the speech of the Opposition Leader.

The sections analysing both Cameron's speech and Miliband's speech will comprise three main steps: an overview of the argument reconstruction, a detailed analysis of the elements of the argument, and the schemata of the argument reconstruction to show how the elements are interconnected in the argument as a whole. In the analysis of the elements, we discuss both how '*intervention*' and related concepts are strategically used within different elements of the argument and how the speakers attempt to fix the meaning of '*intervention*' within each speech.

The Government motion and the Opposition amendment

The complete GM is too long to quote in full here, but can be found on the House of Commons website. The key sections for the purposes of this paper are where it is proposed that the House:

> Notes that the use of chemical weapons is a war crime under customary law and a crime against humanity, and that the principle of humanitarian intervention provides a sound legal basis for taking action;

And also the closing sections, where it is stated that the House:

> Believes that the United Nations Security Council must have the opportunity immediately to consider that briefing and that every effort should be made to secure a Security Council Resolution backing military action before any such action is

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taken, and notes that before any direct British involvement in such action a further vote of the House of Commons will take place; and

Notes that this Resolution relates solely to efforts to alleviate humanitarian suffering by deterring use of chemical weapons and does not sanction any action in Syria with wider objectives.

From the wording here we see that the limits of *'humanitarian intervention'* and its relationship to *'humanitarian suffering'* and *'military action'* are the central concepts to be debated. Following CDA and Discourse Theory, we understand that the debate will not just be about the effectiveness of the proposed intervention, but about the very meaning of the concept itself. Thus, in the analysis of the speeches of Cameron and Miliband, we will focus on how the elements and strategies of each argument may re-construe the concept of *'intervention'* and how, as performance, this draws on wider discourses in the public domain, rather than evaluating the extent to which the argument is logically valid according to objective normative criteria. This sub-section will show briefly the main tensions between the GM and the OA in representing the concept *'intervention'*.

The GM is submitted in advance before the debate, and it presents a statement for MPs to deliberate, in this case a statement that supports the UK *intervention* in Syria. At the beginning of the GM (see full text), the circumstances of the situation are highlighted. The two main circumstances show the use of chemical weapons in Syria and the obligations of the 'international community' towards the Syrian crisis. The use of chemical weapons is represented as a consequence of the negative stance of the international community towards the Syrian crisis over the past years. However, later in the motion, the circumstances seem to be showing the positive role of the United Nations that would support the military action in Syria, and how 'if necessary, require military action that is legal'. The goals are twofold: deterring any further use of chemical weapons, and saving lives in Syria. The GM focuses mainly on presenting the circumstances and the need of urgent 'humanitarian intervention' that will prevent any use of chemical weapons in Syria.

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However, the wording of the GM leaves it rather ambiguous as to what the exact action is that the MPs are voting on. The GM presents the factual circumstances mentioned (the use of chemical weapons and the negative international stance) and certain goals (saving lives and deterring any use of chemical weapons) informed by circumstantial values (humanitarian stance, legal action, and institutional facts of obligation) without providing any clear means-goal or action that the MPs should support. It could be argued that the GM is calling on the MPs to vote for a humanitarian response and action. However, the use of the term '*humanitarian intervention*' is vague and unfixed and will thus form the basis of negotiation between many MPs within the debate.

The OA is not directly oppositional to the GM as it:

… supports steps to provide humanitarian protection to the people of Syria but will only support military action involving UK forces if and when the following conditions have been met…

The OA agrees with the GM that the use of chemical weapons is prohibited internationally, and if chemical weapons are used, 'humanitarian protection' has to be supported by steps which means that the UK may not be involved directly in that protection. The meaning of '*intervention*' here appears to be only 'humanitarian' if the UK follows the steps suggested by the OA. The OA also agrees with the goal of GM by stating that, if any military action is needed, it will be aimed at deterring any further use of chemical weapons, alleviating a humanitarian crisis and upholding the international prohibition on chemical weapons. Therefore, the GM and OA agree that '*to intervene*' means acting to prevent something bad from happening or continuing, as well as on the potential need for UK military action, but disagree in terms of what actions count as intervention. The main tension between the OA and the GM is that the OA sets several conditions (or what can be called the sub-actions) that the current situation has to meet to support any type of intervention. These material safeguards add to rather than recalibrate the meaning of

'*intervention*' by the OA, emphasising the need for caution and attempting to prevent any negative consequences of military intervention.

Cameron's speech

In his speech Cameron used the core elements of argumentation as described by Fairclough & Fairclough as well as some additional elements. Each element shows a stage of ideas and concepts that participate to reconstruct the meaning of '*intervention*'. At the same time, these stages of argument are interconnected within each other. For example, the *values* are used mainly to restrict the *goals*, then the *values* and *goals* are coordinated together to support the main *claim* (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). In this section, we analyse each core element in a sub-section, then we give a snapshot of the additional elements.

Main elements of argument

The starting point here should be the main claim of the argument. However, as with the GM, Cameron's main claim is not entirely clear beyond a call to support the current vote in anticipation of a second vote when the final reports of the UN inspectors are provided. There is, therefore, no clear action that Cameron advocates beyond supporting the vote at this time.

Circumstances

The dominant premises used by Cameron are the *circumstances* that are represented in two main categories: the problems within the situation and the *moral values* implicated. The first category is the description of the problem that is shown two sub-categories: (1) the international context; and (2) the local context of the UK. The international context is represented by showing the situation in Syria and the international stance towards it. The situation in Syria is highlighted as the main problem because of the use of chemical weapons. This situation is evaluated in a way to show the need for taking military action, for example:

> The question before the House today is how to respond to one of the most abhorrent uses of chemical weapons in a century, which has slaughtered innocent men, women, and children in Syria…

This example not only shows the existence of the use of chemical weapons, but it also expresses the need for a clear stance against this crisis by UK parliament. As part of discussing the global situation, the role of the UN inspectors is represented positively by showing their effective work through the initial reports that can be construed as support for military action. The representation of the global context highlights the 'condemnation' of those who used chemical weapons, and the positive role of the international community in supporting the legality of action against the use of CW.

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The second sub-category for describing the situation is the local context of the UK. Thus is expressed first in terms of public perceptions, as public fears of any military intervention are a potential obstacle for the GM and would affect how the UK should deal with such a significant issue. The focus then shifts to multiculturalism and the situation of young Muslims in the UK, suggesting that "many of them may be asking whether the world is going to step up and respond". This group is thus represented as actors putting the UK government under pressure to support the stance towards the Syrian crisis as coded in the GM. In the UK situation, Cameron represents the shared imaginaries for the whole UK in terms of the public fear of any military action, which he attempts to relate to the specific situation of the Iraq war and the mistakes made. This is a comparison Cameron (implicitly) draws on many times in his speech.

The second category of circumstantial premise are the *moral values*. These are categorised under the circumstances because they are external reasons and not personal interests of the arguer (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). With Cameron's speech, *moral values* are shown in three categories: institutional facts, the legal situation and the humanitarian situation. First, institutional facts are presented in terms of MPs having the power to get the required information and make the right decision, as in:

> I would put it to hon. Members that all the evidence we have… and the intelligence that I have reported—is enough to conclude that the regime is responsible and should be held accountable.

Second, *moral values* are used to express the legality of supporting the GM and voting for taking action, as in 'we have published a very clear summary of the legal advice'. The last type of *moral values* is demonstrated in the claim that MPs have an obligation to take a humanitarian stance through their vote for the GM otherwise they "will send a bad message to the world". These *moral values* endow the GM with the impersonal authority, showing how actions are supported by law in order to legitimize the suggested action.

The overall presentation of *circumstances* by Cameron supports the argument of Fairclough & Fairclough (2012) in that circumstances are presented ideologically, and specific types of *circumstances* are shown and evaluated in order to support the main claim. In addition, Cameron attempts to distance his definition of '*intervention*' from Blair by repeating the existence of the evidence for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and *moral values* are used as a sub-category of circumstances to show the legality of supporting '*intervention*'. As such, it can be said that Cameron included and excluded specific elements of the *circumstances* strategically as part of his construal of the signifier '*intervention*', including military action, as humanitarian.

Goals and Values

Cameron's argument has several goals that are informed by values to justify why the claim should be supported. The main goal premise that is repeated throughout the speech is the upholding of the international prohibition of chemical weapons, as in:

> …is Britain a country that wants to uphold that international taboo against the use of chemical weapons? My argument is yes.

In this example, Cameron used the rhetorical structure to give the goal a value of protecting the law. Further stated goals are "saving lives and alleviat[ing] humanitarian suffering," and the desire to "unite…the country". Such unity is presented as a goal that can be achieved if the MPs support the GM. However, the concept of 'uniting the country' is not only used to establish a *goal*, but it is also used to project the national interest as a *value*, as we will see below. While uniting the country is clearly not an element in intervention, this notion has been strategically brought into the debate as it carries implications, by extension, of protecting the national interest. We can claim, therefore, that Cameron is construing one element of '*intervention*' as that it should be as much in the national interest of the country intervening, or at least not detrimental to their national security, as it is beneficial for the country affected. Cameron's discursive strategy here, therefore, represents the appropriation of a value from outside the usual range of signification of a

concept and its articulation as a moment within the web of meanings that define the signifier. There is no neat typology of discrete meanings with clear constituency relations, such as 'uniting the country' and '*intervention*', but rather a constant playing with the boundaries of meaning. Cameron's blending of goals and values here is thus significant from a performative point of view rather than in terms of normative criteria and an evaluation of the validity of the argument.

Means-Goal

As we suggested above, in defining the means-goal we first have to establish the relevant sub-actions/steps that comprise it. Cameron does not use the means-goal premise much in his speech, but he does provide some ambiguous sub-actions to support the main claim, for example:

> …we have set out, very clearly, what Britain would need to see happen for us to take part in that - more action at the UN, a report by the UN inspectors and a further vote in this House.

These sub-actions/steps represented by Cameron are obscure at this point. First, Cameron suggests that there are further actions that will be taken before any intervention, but these actions are not clarified. Moreover, Cameron asks the MPs at the time of the debate to support the intervention before the final reports of the UN, so this may affect the logical series of sub-actions before any intervention. In Cameron's speech, then, the formulation of the *means-goal* shows that the meaning of '*intervention*' is not provided with clear sub-actions that would precede any 'military intervention', and this affects what types of military actions would be supported (i.e. troops and/or airstrikes).

Other elements of Cameron's argument

In our analysis we suggest that there are several further elements of argumentation used by Cameron that are not classified in Fairclough & Fairclough (2012). We will not discuss all of the additional elements here but only focus on those that are used significantly

in the speech and form a salient relation to the meaning of the main signifier '*intervention*'. The elements that will be analysed in this section are: *negation anticipated construal*, *dealing with anticipated negative consequences of proposed action*, and *dealing with objections and alternatives*.

The strategy of *negation of anticipated construal* is used by Cameron when he talks about the circumstances in a way that pre-empts and counters any anticipated alternative construals that might be suggested by MPs. This type is used to show the consideration of any other extending actions that might be carried out by the UK, such as:

> …this situation is not like Iraq. What we are seeing in Syria is fundamentally different. We are not invading a country. We are not searching for chemical or biological weapons.

This example demonstrates how Cameron is aware of likely public fears over any military intervention as a lasting consequence of the use of military force in Iraq under Blair and as we saw in the discussion of the presentation of the public fears in the *circumstances* premise. In adopting this move Cameron therefore strategically contrasts '*intervention*' with 'invasion' while also *excluding* the search for weapons as an element that might be considered a legitimate element of the meaning of '*intervention*'.

Another novel element in Cameron's speech is *dealing with anticipated negative consequences of a proposed action*, which is used to show that potential negative consequences have been foreseen, considered, and overruled. This element is interconnected with the previous element because both of them build on the past experience of Iraq war and serve to distance the present government from those actions. In the example "we must not let the spectre of previous mistakes paralyse our ability to stand up for what is right", we can see how the spectre of the Iraq war looms in many elements of the argument, but can also be overridden in order to emphasise the 'humanitarian' aspect of '*intervention*'. We can see from both these novel strategies of 'anticipation' how Cameron strategically delimits rather than expands the meaning of '*intervention*', disarticulating

those elements which may be though to carry too many negative associations with previous construals and consequent actions.

A similar strategy, though not demonstrating anticipation, is *dealing with objections and alternatives*. This element comes when MPs from the floor attempt to rebut Cameron's argument, as when some argued that the whole picture of the situation at that time was not clear. Even when Cameron reassures them that there will be another vote if this one proceeds, they suggest that they will oppose the GM in order to prevent any potential military intervention. In response, Cameron states:

> I am not standing here and saying that there is some piece or pieces of intelligence that I have seen, or the JIC has seen, that the world will not see, that convince me that I am right and anyone who disagrees with me is wrong. I am saying that this is a judgment; we all have to reach a judgment about what happened and who was responsible…

Again distancing himself from potential associations with previous interventions, Cameron claims this objection is not valid because the evidence is available from many sources and not just a single 'piece of intelligence' (echoing the "dodgy dossier") while making it clear that this is a humanitarian issue as mentioned in the circumstances. Implicitly, therefore, Cameron is suggesting that '*intervention*' should not only be for humanitarian rather than economic or military ends, but also that it should not be rash or precipitous. While this last concept might not be considered a core element of meaning, it certainly adds to a positive prosody and a contrast with 'invasion', the now popular construal of Blair's government. However, this concept is counterbalanced in Cameron's response to a suggested alternative action to try those who use chemical weapons in the International Criminal Court (ICC). Cameron rebuts this idea on the grounds of the slowness of ICC and the possibility that during the process of ICC Assad might continue to use chemical weapons. Through these two strategies together, therefore, we can see an

emerging construal of '*intervention*' as considered yet timely action, positively situated between the two negative poles of rashness and inaction.

A final alternative proposed in this part of the debate is the process of 'diplomatic engagement'. In response, Cameron recommends this solution in order to achieve the long-term goal of ending the Syrian crisis while advocating military action to prevent the use of chemical weapons in the immediate term. In this way '*intervention*' is construed *as an integral element within the larger signifier* of 'diplomacy'.

Figure 2 below shows the whole elements of Cameron's argument for his complete speech. Each element of the argument is represented in one box that shows how ideas and concepts are categorised according to the practical reasoning approach. The arrows are used to show whether the element is supporting the main claim directly or indirectly[6].

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[6] The abbreviation "CW" in the boxes refers to "chemical weapons".

COUNTER-CLAIM: Not to vote for taking action in Syria, specifically at this time.

CLAIM: The vote for taking military action against the use of CW in Syria after the initial reports of UN

ARGUMENT FROM AUTHORITY: Arab League, President of the United States and Attorney-General's excellent legal advice that all support the need for taking international action against the Syrian regime.

NEGATIVE CONSEQUANCES OF COUNTER-CLAIM: Another use of CW; destroying the international system towards the use of prohibited weapons.

GOALS: Saving lives and alleviating humanitarian suffering by deterring any further use of CW; protecting the international prohibition for the use of CW; uniting the country by supporting the vote

CIRCUMSTANCES: The UK is in front of international crisis which is the use of CW; this crisis had made the Syrian situation worse; the stance of Assad regime towards their use of CW; international condemnation and fears towards this crisis: the existence of evidence for the use of CW by the Assad regime; international and UK stance; evaluating the role of the MPs, and their consideration for the Syrian crisis; situation of young Muslims in the UK and world. **MORAL VALUES:** International prohibition of using CW, legality and humanitarian values for taking military action against Assad regime.

MEANS-GOALS: This premise is represented implicitly steps of the government motion including UN inspectors' initial report; considering the significance of the circumstances and us of CW; this vote and the second vote will achieve the goals.

DEALING WITH ANTICIPATED NEGATIVE CONSEQUANCES OF PROPOSED ACTION: mistakes of Iraq intervention; recognizing the Security Council issues towards the best path; Considering the public skepticism and economic situation; following clear steps before any military action.

NEGATION ANTICIPATED CONSTRUAL: extended goals such as participating directly in the conflict; the role of other allies such as America for making the UK decision.

VALUES: Personal interest that shows the significance of the action; national and international interest; the vote for the motion will unite the country; standing up against genocide.

ARGUMENT FROM AUTHORITY: Joint Intelligence Committee condemn the use of CW; Médecins sans Frontières report; counter-terrorism experts.

DEALING WITH ALTERNATIVES AND OBJECTIONS: the provided information of the situation can be clear to make the decision for the UK stance; the slowness of International Criminal Court would make the process slow; the motion has clear path; the process of diplomatic engagement is useful for long-term objectives; military action is needed for the current crisis; Consensus about the use of CW is wrong, so this supports the path of the GM.
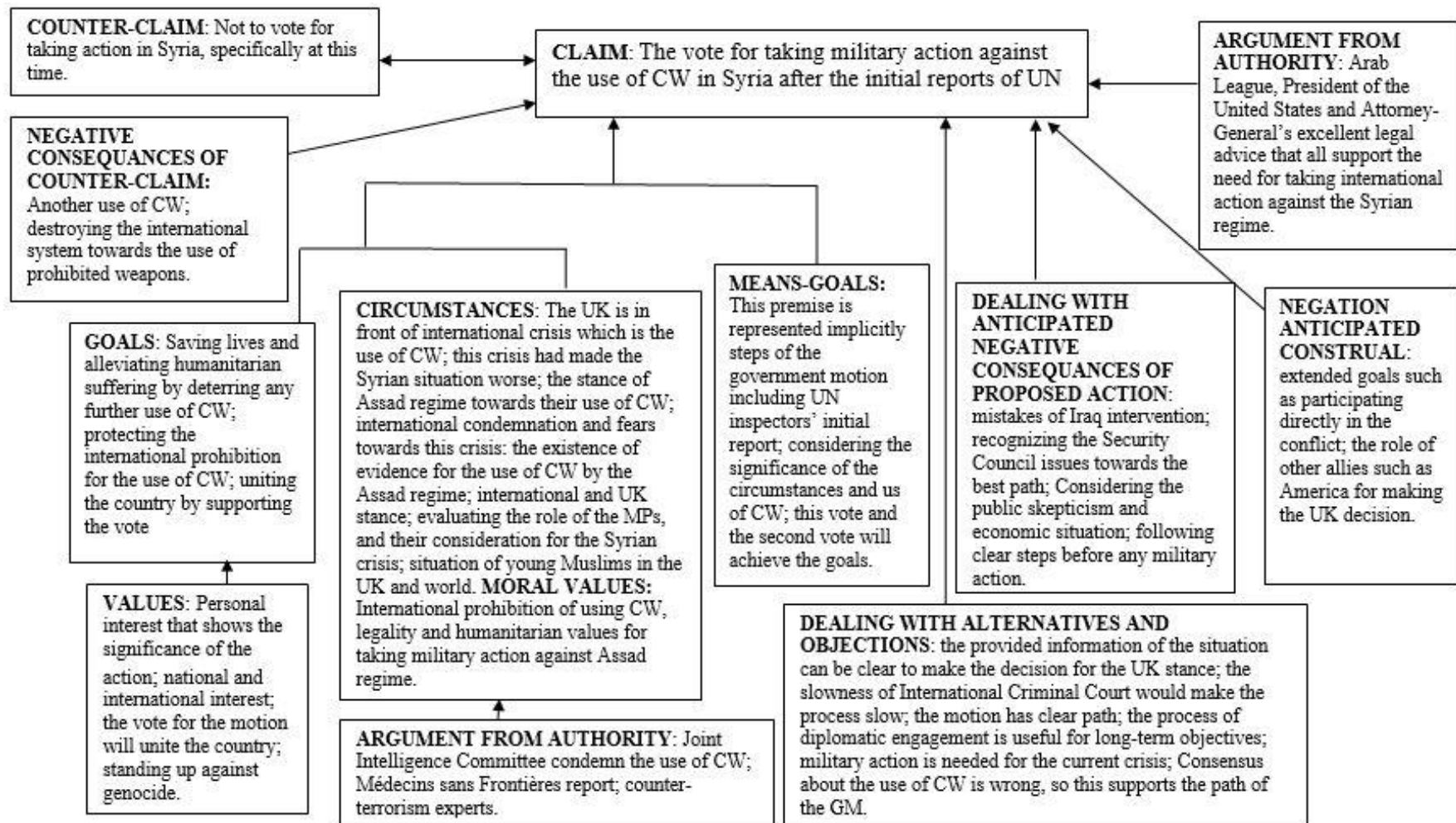
Figure 2: The structure of practical argument for Cameron's speech.

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In this section analysing Cameron's speech, we suggested that Cameron reconstructed his argument by using several stages in order to present the meaning of '*intervention*' as legal and humanitarian, and hence to suggest that the GM needs to be supported urgently in response to a humanitarian catastrophe. These core concepts are shown in the circumstances and goals of the main claim. A central element, introduced in the GM itself, developed in Cameron's speech, and picked up on by opponents, is the connection between '*humanitarian suffering*', '*humanitarian intervention*' and the subsequent legality of '*military action*'. This suggests significant contestations, or antagonisms, concerning the military and humanitarian construals of '*intervention*' and the importance of these for the vote. We now turn to an analysis of how these tensions are taken up in the speech of the opposition leader, Ed Miliband.

Miliband's speech

Miliband not only directly challenges Cameron's strategic construal of '*intervention*' by rebutting many of the points in the first speech, but also puts forward new arguments as part of his own construal of '*intervention*'. There are, however, several significant similarities between the premises underlying the arguments of both Cameron and Miliband and in this section we discuss how the similarities and differences between the two speeches contribute to the two politicians' alternative construals of '*intervention*' as a signifier.

Main elements of argument

Miliband's main claim can be summarised as "if military action is to be taken, we will have to follow specific criteria…". This therefore represents the most significant element of '*intervention*' as strategically construed in opposition to the GM. In the following sections we will consider the argumentation strategies that are used to develop

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and back up this claim, and how Miliband attempts to construe the meaning of '*intervention*' within the stages of his argument.

Circumstances

In his speech Miliband sets out two categories of *Circumstances*: (1) an explanation of the general situation; and (2) the institutional facts that define who can legally participate in the Syrian crisis and their responsibilities. At the beginning of his speech, Miliband refers to "the condemnation of the international community", so echoing Cameron's construal of multilateral agreement on the severity of the situation as an essential element of '*intervention*' as a distancing strategy from the sort of accusations levelled at Blair. Despite this similarity, however, there is a significant shift in emphasis when Miliband expands on the level of international cooperation required and reconstrues the institutional facts as restrictions on the potential for unilateral action:

> The international community also has a duty to do everything it can to support the Geneva II process.

This difference between Cameron and Miliband becomes clear on several occasions when Miliband reaffirms his central claim that taking a stance against the use of chemical weapons is now under the authority of the UN. Moreover, Miliband proposes that MPs "need to be clear-eyed about the impact that [any military response] would have…". Even when taking a clear stance against the use of chemical weapons, therefore, Miliband makes the case that this is not the right time to support the GM. Whereas Cameron's argument proposed that a '*humanitarian crisis*' should be supported by a direct UK '*humanitarian intervention*', which might include '*military action*', Miliband disarticulates these concepts in condemning the use of chemical weapons in Syria on the one hand while first emphasising that intervention is the responsibility of international institutions rather than individual countries and secondly suggesting that such intervention may have consequences. We see, therefore, how the concepts of '*humanitarian intervention*', '*military action*' and '*humanitarian crisis*' are woven into different webs of signification

by the two speakers as they seek to create a persuasive imaginary that will swing the vote in their favour.

Means-Goal

The above *circumstances* lead to the main focus of Miliband's speech, which is the *means-goal*, or what we analyse in this contribution as the sub-actions that precede the main action. In Miliband's speech, there are two classes of sub-actions: the actions of the MPs in relation to the international community; and the actions of the MPs in the House of Commons. These two types seem to be similar to the institutional facts represented above; however, in this section, the role of the MPs is represented to show what type of the sub-actions the MPs should undertake before supporting any '*intervention*' at the international level.

The first class of sub-action entails that MPs have to work to support the international community in doing its job and that MPs should encourage the international community to be directly involved in a response to the crisis. In this respect, and in clear contrast with Cameron, Miliband stresses that '*intervention*' should mean 'international intervention' rather than 'UK intervention':

> We should strain every sinew to make the international institutions that we have in our world work to deal with the outrages in Syria.

The second class of sub-action, entails MPs in the House of Commons seeking compelling evidence and fully considering the situation before endorsing any support for military action. To this effect, Miliband proposes that

> …as the Prime Minister said, in conflict there is always reason for doubt, but the greater the weight of evidence the better.

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These *means-goals* clarify how some ideas shift from *circumstance* to *means-goal*. *Circumstances* and *means-goal* seem to support each other as the same ideas shift between various stages of the overall argument. For example, Miliband displays *circumstantial values* through highlighting the duties of the international community while he suggests that the MPs should support the international community to do their job as this is part of the *means-goals*. This contrasts with Cameron's argument, in which he proposes that the UK should support the military action and suggests that the international community may not be able to achieve the *goals* without a support from the UK. The different weighting afforded to these ideas through their placement in different elements of the argumentation structure has consequences for both the semantic reconstrual of '*intervention*' as an imaginary and the strategic goals of the two speakers. Through Miliband's construal of international agreement not as a circumstance legitimising unilateral '*intervention*' but as a means-goal to be achieved as part of multilateral action, Miliband's speech not only recalibrates '*intervention*' as a key signifier but also introduces clear resonances with the Iraq war, which had not achieved international backing and which, by the time of this debate, had come to be seen as ill-considered and relying on poor, if not downright 'dodgy', intelligence.

Goals and values

The *goals* of Miliband's argument have similarities and differences to the goals of Cameron. The corresponding goals are the deterrence of any further use of chemical weapons, and the attempts to find a solution for the Syrian civil war. For example, Miliband suggests that "[a]ny military action must be specifically designed to deter the future use of chemical weapons". These two goals are similar to the goals in Cameron's argument and the GM. However, as already suggested above, Miliband adds one more *goal*, to protect the country from any negative consequences, when he states that "[a]ny military action must… have regard for the consequences of any action." This *goal* may relate to the national interest as a common element as it entails that any reasons presented for military intervention should be balanced with considerations of the negative consequences in order to 'protect' the country from any backlash. Again, the spectre of Iraq looms large here as

in many sections of public opinion the escalation of radical Islamic activity is a direct result of Blair' 'intervention' in Iraq. The *value* premise seems to be presented implicitly because what can be regarded as a real concern for Miliband is the need for 'compelling evidence' before MPs vote for a crucial action. The *goals* and *values* stages in Miliband's speech therefore articulate two further elements around the meaning of '*intervention*': a basis in compelling evidence and a lack of wider risk for the intervening country.

Other elements in Miliband's argument

In addition to the main elements of Miliband's argument, there are two additional stages: (1) *dealing with objections and alternatives*; and (2) *dealing with Cameron's claims*. With regard to the first of these, there are two objections raised from the floor against Miliband's argument. First, an MP claims that the evidence provided by Cameron and the GM is convincing enough to back supporting military intervention, while another MP suggests that the sources necessary for deciding the UK stance are readily available. However, Miliband argues that '*intervention*' should proceed according to the steps set out previously in the *means-goal*, which he reaffirms. In terms of countering Cameron's claim, Miliband deals directly with some of the ideas represented by Cameron, as when he argues that taking any military action at that time will make the UK directly involved in the Syrian conflict as an attempts to rebut Cameron's earlier *negation of anticipated construal*. Figure 3 shows how the elements of Miliband's argument are articulated in the whole speech.
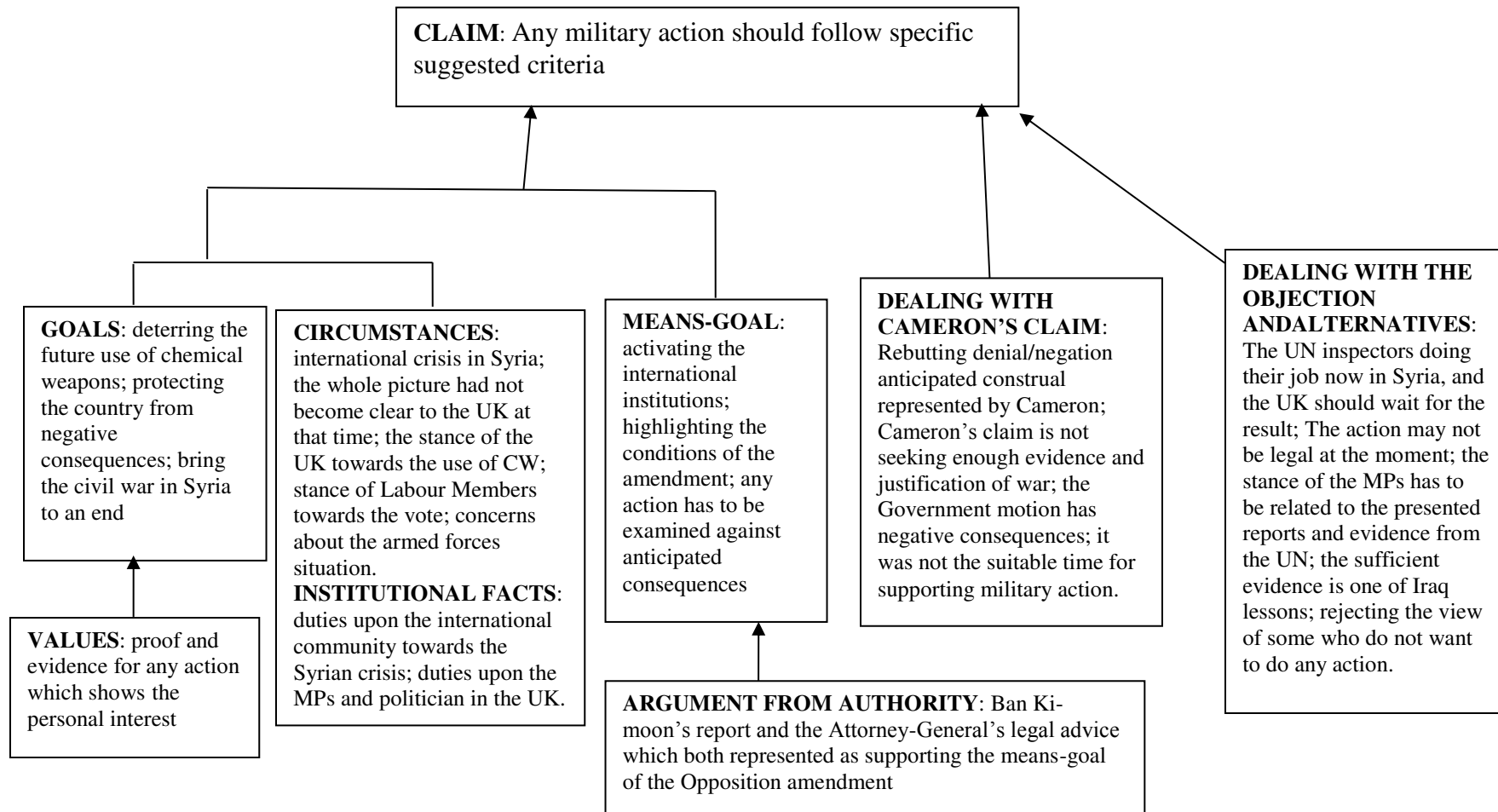
CLAIM: Any military action should follow specific suggested criteria

GOALS: deterring the future use of chemical weapons; protecting the country from negative consequences; bring the civil war in Syria to an end

VALUES: proof and evidence for any action which shows the personal interest

CIRCUMSTANCES: international crisis in Syria; the whole picture had not become clear to the UK at that time; the stance of the UK towards the use of CW; stance of Labour Members towards the vote; concerns about the armed forces situation.
INSTITUTIONAL FACTS: duties upon the international community towards the Syrian crisis; duties upon the MPs and politician in the UK.

MEANS-GOAL: activating the international institutions; highlighting the conditions of the amendment; any action has to be examined against anticipated consequences

ARGUMENT FROM AUTHORITY: Ban Ki-moon's report and the Attorney-General's legal advice which both represented as supporting the means-goal of the Opposition amendment

DEALING WITH CAMERON'S CLAIM: Rebutting denial/negation anticipated construal represented by Cameron; Cameron's claim is not seeking enough evidence and justification of war; the Government motion has negative consequences; it was not the suitable time for supporting military action.

DEALING WITH THE OBJECTION ANDALTERNATIVES: The UN inspectors doing their job now in Syria, and the UK should wait for the result; The action may not be legal at the moment; the stance of the MPs has to be related to the presented reports and evidence from the UN; the sufficient evidence is one of Iraq lessons; rejecting the view of some who do not want to do any action.

Figure 3: The structure of practical argument for Miliband's argument

Conclusion

The reconstruction of Miliband's argument shows several similarities and differences between the speeches of Cameron and Miliband in their debate about the meaning of military intervention. First, they agree on the goals that can be considered legitimate within the signification of 'intervention,' which in this case are primarily to deter any further use of CW in Syria and to find a solution to the Syrian crisis. The similarity of their goals lead to a partial similarity in the claim that *military* intervention may be necessary. In addition, the speeches of Cameron and Miliband display certain similarities in representing the circumstances underlying the debate, and more specifically regarding the critical situation in Syrian. However, they differ in how they represent the obligations upon the UK and international institutions and in doing so they suggest different construals of the full signification of '*intervention*'. Cameron emphasises the humanitarian aspect of 'intervention,' even when this entails '*military action*', and uses this to disregard or downplay other elements of meaning such as the need for international support, the careful balancing of pros and cons and a concern for avoiding repercussions that Miliband construes as essential elements of the concept.

As demonstrated, these different construals are achieved not simply in terms of the differing content of the two speeches but also in terms of their respective argument structures and the placement of central elements of meaning in different stages of these arguments. Overall, the analyses show the contestation around the meaning of '*intervention*' and how deliberative argumentation can be used to legitimate/delegitimate an action or set of actions through the reconstrual of key concepts and the articulation of existing ideas in novel and competing constellations. In our methodology and analysis we have shown how the normative framework of Fairclough & Fairclough (2012) can be utilised for analysing debate from a *performative* as well as a *normative* perspective and how such an analysis can account for the discursive shifts in signification in the terms of Laclau & Mouffe's Discourse Theory. The conclusions made with regard to the two speeches and shifts in the signification of '*intervention*' are tentative, however, as they form part of longer-term processes which can only be interpreted through diachronic

studies charting the interaction of such debates, as seismographs of public concerns, with wider discourses across diverse modes of interaction, and the consolidation of such changes over time[7].

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[7] As in the wider research programme from which this paper is drawn.

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