

Brexit Phraseology

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That social, cultural and political events leave their mark on the language of the communities shaped by those events is well-established in the area of the lexicon (cf. cultural keywords). Recently, it has been shown that phraseological phenomena, common turns of phrase or usual expression in a speech community are also susceptible to influence through significant events in the life of a community (e.g. Skandera, 2007). The 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union was doubtlessly a significant event that has resulted in a prolonged and on-going period of social, cultural and political change and uncertainty. As such, one would expect not only notable neologisms, but also changes to the phraseology of English as used in the UK and indeed, occasional comments in the press (e.g. Henley and Walker, 2017) suggest a degree of popular awareness in this regard.

Casual observation suggests that Brexit has occasioned the creation of new or newly prominent multi-word terms and slogans, and may have brought fresh prominence to some phraseological dinosaurs (cherry picking / having cake and eating it). But do these familiar high-profile expressions reflect all of the phraseology of Brexit, or are there other, perhaps less noticeable turns of phrase that are important? Is there one phraseology of Brexit, or have different phases of Brexit produced their own distinct phraseological repertoires? Are Brexit-related phraseological expressions likely to be one-day wonders or might they be making their way into the phraseology of British English more permanently? With Brexit still very much an unfolding development at the time of writing, there are no existing studies that have addressed these questions, nor can a treatment of them be definitive at this stage. Trends based on developments up to the end of 2018 can, however, provide indicative answers. Existing treatments of Brexit and language have engaged with questions of language policy and ideology, particularly the role of English in a post-Brexit EU (e.g. Jacobsen, 2017; Kelly, 2018; Modiano, 2017), or have used corpus data to predict or analyse the outcome of the referendum using opinion mining (e.g. Celli, Poesio and Riccardi, 2016; similarly Vasiliki et al., 2017). Others have taken a discourse-analytic approach (e.g. Buckledee, 2018; Achilleos-Sarll and Martill, 2019; Koller et al., 2019) or looked at Brexit language from a lexicological and morphological perspective (e.g. Fontaine, 2017; Lalić-Krstin and Silaški, 2018). Treatments of phraseological aspects, however, are to date largely missing, notwithstanding Ní Loingsigh's (2018) treatment of Irish Gaelic Brexit terms including multi-word periphrastic examples.

To help address the specific questions set out above, a corpus of 7 million words of media reports across a wide range of print and broadcast media (newspapers, magazines, newsletters and transcripts of broadcasts) containing the word *Brexit* were analysed in this study. Reports include texts

from news sections as well all other sections including business analysis, culture, reader letters, etc.; publication dates were balanced across time from the day after the referendum to the end of 2018. A comparative corpus of texts not including the word *Brexit*, but covering the same time period, was also used. Texts were obtained from the Nexis database and processed using the MWE Toolkit (Ramisch, 2015) and Substring 1.0 (Buerki, 2018) to extract a list of phraseological expressions of variable length. The detailed methodology is closely similar that employed by Buerki (2016): a frequency cut-off of 3 occurrences per a million words was first applied to the list of all word n-grams of lengths 2 to 9 words extracted from the corpora, followed by a stop-list and lexico-structural filter to extract lists of common word sequences that form semantic units. To identify Brexit-related expressions, all expressions shared between the lists of the main corpus and the comparison (non-Brexit) corpus were removed from the list obtained from the main corpus of texts containing an occurrence of the word *Brexit*. This is a fairly rough heuristic and presumes that any Brexit domain-specific items of phraseology have not yet spread beyond discussions of Brexit, and further that differences merely in frequency of occurrence in Brexit-related texts vs. other texts are not sufficient to warrant attention. For the purposes of this study, this was useful in focussing the analysis and making data volumes more manageable.

Among the vast number of phraseological expressions of Brexit identified by the procedure outlined are examples (1) to (35). Among these are cases of multi-word terms that are either new (at least in their specific, idiomatic meaning or combination), as in (1) to (9), or, while pre-dating the referendum, have received vastly increased prominence that propelled them from their specialist domain into general use, as (10) to (12). Some of these technical terms are deliberate coinings, e.g. (7), (11) and (12), but corpus data show that they have developed their own extended collocational patterns. For example, *Article 50* strongly collocates with *to trigger* (rather than *invoke*, for example), the strongest pattern for (1) is *avoid a cliff edge*, and (8) shows a number of usual extended phrasings including *[avoiding / prevent / a return to / face] a hard border [between Northern Ireland and the Republic [of Ireland]]*, showing that these terms are part of conventionalised turns of phrase.

- (1) cliff edge
- (2) final say
- (3) Brexit uncertainty
- (4) the referendum
- (5) [a] hard/soft Brexit
- (6) second referendum
- (7) transition period
- (8) hard border
- (9) meaningful vote
- (10) Article 50
- (11) freedom of movement
- (12) customs union and single market

Outside of multi-word terms and their patterns, (13) to (16) show a small number of the many recurring phrases unearthed – they transition into the more flexible patterns of (17) to (27), some of which are existing constructions that have acquired new importance.

- (13) [leave] without a deal
- (14) since the referendum / since the Brexit vote / following Brexit
- (15) voted leave
- (16) fall in the value of the pound
- (17) the uncertainty surrounding [Brexit/the status of EU nationals/the UK's future relationship with the EU/...]
- (18) because of Brexit / as a result of [Brexit/leaving [the EU]]
- (19) what Brexit will mean for X
- (20) [concerned about] the impact/effect of Brexit [on X]
- (21) in the post-Brexit X
- (22) crash[ing] out [of the EU] without X
- (23) raised the prospect of X
- (24) have a negative impact on X
- (25) the potential impact of X
- (26) X has warned Y / X warned of Y / warning that [Brexit could] X
- (27) [what] Brexit means [for [business/Wales/the future of X/...]]

The final few examples are extended deliberate coinings, (28) to (33), and the aforementioned existing idioms, (34) to (35). Their length and high frequency on the list of Brexit the phraseology is notable because long sequences and pure idioms are very rare in normal language use (e.g. Moon, 1998).

- (28) the best possible deal
- (29) Brexit means Brexit
- (30) no deal is better than a bad deal
- (31) take back control [of [immigration / our laws, borders, money and trade / ...]]
- (32) get the best deal [for [families and businesses / Britain / every part of the UK / ...]]
- (33) a deal that works [for [both sides / everybody / business / the whole country / ...]]
- (34) [have] cake and eat[ing] it
- (35) cherry pick[ing]

The data show that popularly recognised high-profile expressions do reflect the phraseology of Brexit, but there are many more subtle patterns that have slipped under the radar while just as much part of Brexit phraseology. Further, although deliberate coinings feature strongly, they are joined by more naturally conventionalised expressions and many of the coined terms are themselves embedded in usual phrasings. In terms of diachronic aspects, there do appear to be expressions on the list, such as (28), that have aged

badly and are tied to a particular phase of Brexit in a way that makes them appear dated now. Perhaps not surprisingly, the slogans-category may be most susceptible to oblivion, but some, possibly (30), may be preserved (and perhaps become winged words) due to their notoriety. Terms which reference events that will be of little importance once they have occurred (or once their likelihood of occurring has disappeared), are perhaps likely to disappear in the medium term. These include (1), (2), (5) and (9). However, it seems that other phrasings and patterns have a good chance of entering the phraseology of British English generally. This is for two reasons: one is that Brexit is no longer a specialist discourse topic, but due to its character as a prolonged UK-wide crisis, has become a part of everyday experience and is likely to remain so for a while longer. The other is that even once the crisis is over, its effects will have been of a magnitude that guarantees future reference to it and will likely be seen as epoch-defining. Therefore, expressions like (14), (18) or (21) may end up attaining a similar status to expressions like *after the [Second World] war* or *post-war Britain* which corpora show to be stable expressions of the English Language.

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