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ABSTRACT

A growing concern in most European countries, 'polarisation' has spread far beyond the political arena and is now present in public opinion in a wide variety of social and cultural subjects, from economics to education, health, environment or religion. Rather than an enriching plurality of views, polarisation is mostly perceived as a negative trend that hinders consensus and favours conflict instead, threatening welfare, peace and even democracy. As a result, the word *polarisation* has become a frequent term in the press.

This paper examines the way in which the word *polarización/polarisation* is used in a corpus of news items collected from four widely read mainstream newspapers, two Spanish and two British, all of them containing the word *polarización/polarisation* and published in 2022. A combination of Corpus Linguistics methods and a Critical Socio-Cognitive approach to Discourse Analysis has been followed in order to analyse the most common contexts and patterns of usage of the term in the press in these two countries, its negative semantic prosody and collocational behaviour, as well as the underlying schematic conceptualization of the phenomenon as realized in metaphors and image schemas. Even though minor differences have been found, results show significant similarities in Spanish and English, which manifest the negative evaluation associated to the term construed by its collocates, by metaphorical source domains such as DISEASE, WAR or DANGEROUS NATURAL FORCES, as well as by image schemas that impinge on physical and ideological distance. Conclusions suggest that *polarisation* has become a sociopolitical keyword; a 'superword' with enhanced meanings and strong framing effects in the texts in which it occurs.

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Polarisation: the new 'superword'. Meanings and current uses in English and Spanish

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1. Introduction

Polarisation is a growing concern in most Western countries nowadays. There seems to be a generalized feeling that it is expanding and affecting different areas of social life.¹ Both traditional and social media reflect and reproduce this worry and it is possible to find constant references in them to the 'extreme polarisation' affecting one or another country (Porto 2023). As a consequence, the word *polarisation* has significantly increased its frequency in the last decade and accordingly developed its core meaning, extending its scope and incorporating ideological and evaluative nuances. All this makes the term a candidate for being nominated as a sociopolitical keyword in our days.

Jeffries and Walker (2017, 2019) define a sociopolitical keyword as a statistically frequent term that takes on political and social significance in a short period of time and that shows new semantic meanings and uses in new contexts. According to these authors, sociopolitical keywords 'connote a whole complex of meaning subtly different from the everyday usage of the same word and work as a kind of shorthand for a whole ideological stance' (Jeffries & Walker 2019: 53), and their frequent use in public discourse can contribute to the formation of opinions, as well as to potentially influence political events (Jeffries & Walkers 2012).

On this line, the present chapter examines the usage, meaning development and ideological framing effects of the lexeme *polarisation* based on the 'a priori judgement' (Jeffries & Walker 2019) that it is a sociopolitical keyword, mostly supported by its increased frequency in public discourse and especially in the media.² The research questions addressed are the following:

- 1) What are the new patterns of use of the word?
- 2) Is polarisation, as reflected in media discourse, a local phenomenon, or can we also find it in neighbouring countries such as UK and Spain?

1 This perception is confirmed by several surveys and studies like the national survey on political polarisation carried out by the University of Murcia <https://www.cemopmurcia.es/estudios/ii-encuesta-nacional-de-polarizacion-politica/>, or the report *Divided Britain?* conducted by the Policy Institute at King's College London <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/how-polarised-is-the-2019-general-election.pdf>, among others.

2 A rough exploration of the web using Google search engine shows an increasing trend in which the use of the terms *polarización*/*polarisation* has almost doubled in the last five years both in Spain and the United Kingdom (Porto 2023).

3) Which are the rhetorical or framing effects of the new uses of the word?

In short, we intend to understand how such a complex concept as *polarisation* is conceptualized in the media discourse today. That is, how it has acquired such a variety of new senses and uses that have turned it into a sociopolitical keyword, pervasive in public discourse and allegedly carrying and spreading a specific ideology.

To this aim, a combination of Corpus Linguistics methods and a Critical Socio-Cognitive approach to Discourse Analysis was followed to study the frequency, patterns of use, discourse prosody and metaphorical extensions of the term *polarización/polarisation* (and its inflections: *polarising, polarised...*) in the British and Spanish press in 2022. The quantitative results provided by corpus analysis were complemented with the application of Critical Socio-Cognitive concepts, such as conceptual metaphors, image schemas and frames, which revealed an axiological-evaluative shift from its original neutral, scientific meaning to its present highly negative sense derived from the recontextualization of the term and its novel patterns of usage.

In the following sections, the paper first presents the theoretical concepts involved in the study (section 2). Next, the methodological steps taken for the data collection and the analysis are detailed (section 3). Section 4 provides the results and discussion. And, finally, section 5 summarises our main conclusions.

2. Theoretical concepts

Polarisation, defined as ‘the act of dividing something, especially something that contains different people or opinions, into two completely opposing groups’,³ is today a growing field of research within social media theory, sociology, political science and social psychology, in the main. Initially, scholars mostly focused on ideological or political polarisation, that is, the extent to which political views diverge away from the centre towards ideological extremes (DiMaggio et al. 1996). Since then, researchers have analysed how polarisation is created (McCarty 2021), how it can be slowed down and even prevented (Axelrod et al. 2021; Simchon et al. 2022), and how it is intensified by social media (Bail et al. 2018; Conover et al. 2011; Gillani et al. 2018; Yardi & Boyd 2010). There seems to be a general agreement that the development and spread of communication technologies has played a leading role in this rising tendency. According to Bail et al. (2021: 9216), social media sites exacerbate political polarisation by creating echo chambers or patterns of information sharing that reinforce pre-existing political beliefs by limiting exposure to opposing political views. More recently, scholars have also looked into how political partisan opinions influence attitudes and behaviours outside the political domain and can become a mechanism of social identity construction (Iyengar et al. 2012; Mason 2015), in which not only positive sentiment for one’s own group is present, but also negative senti-

3 <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/polarization>

ment towards those identifying with opposing groups. This means that individuals show emotional attachment towards the ideology and worldviews of the in-group together with animosity towards the members of the opposing ideology or out-group (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Hogg 2016). This phenomenon has been called ‘affective polarization’ (Iyengar et al. 2012, 2019; Simchon et al. 2022).

Ideological and affective polarisation, even though distinct concepts, can be considered two sides of the same coin, as any in-group/out-group distinction, even one based on the most trivial of shared characteristics, triggers both positive feelings for the in-group and negative evaluations of the out-group (Billig and Tajfel 1973, in Iyengar et al. 2019: 130). However, as pointed out by Reiljan (2020), whereas ideological polarisation is necessary and positive to a certain degree, as it allows voters to make a meaningful choice, affective polarisation is ‘unequivocally considered as a negative and dangerous phenomenon’ with undesirable consequences, also analysed by researchers, like the loss of confidence in the political system, the lack of cooperation among parties or even discriminatory behaviour towards their opposing partisans (2020: 376).

In addition to the aforementioned findings, which come from different social sciences, discursive approaches to polarisation, even though still limited, are greatly contributing to explain the phenomenon today. The analysis of polarisation strategies in discourse is rooted in a long tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis where the legitimization of the in-group (‘us’) is discursively constructed in strong opposition to the negative characterization of the outer-group (‘them’) (de Cillia et al. 1999; van Dijk 1998; 2008; Wodak et al. 2009). Already in 1998, van Dijk proposed the systematization of discursive strategies for ‘group conflict or competition’ by means of an *ideological square* that shows how individuals construe ingroup identity and cohesion emphasizing positive aspects of their group while delegitimizing and demonizing the outgroup through different linguistic devices such as the distribution of agency (van Dijk 1998). Some recent works in the field of Critical Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis stem from the belief that language plays a crucial role in the construction of conflict and polarisation (Filardo-Llamas et al. 2022) and examine a wide array of polarising strategies such as metaphor and image schemas, social actor representation, evaluative collocates or labelling, among many others (Ahlstrand 2021; Koller et al. 2019; De Cock et al. 2021; Peterssen & Soares da Silva 2023). Also worth mentioning is the linguistic research coming from psychology (Buders et al. 2021; Simchon et al. 2022), which mostly focuses on the role of language in fuelling polarisation in social media.

It is in this context of recent attention to the phenomenon of polarisation within the field of discourse that the word itself has become a sociopolitical keyword. The original meaning of *polarisation*, ‘the process or phenomenon in which the waves of light or other electromagnetic radiation are restricted to certain directions of vibration’,⁴ belonged to the domain of physics, but it developed metaphorical meanings quite early, both in English and Spanish. The use of *polarisation* within political contexts as ‘an increasingly stark and antagonistic divi-

4 <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/polarization>

sion between political parties, groups, or viewpoints, and the accompanying decline of moderate or centrist positions that normally mediate those differences'⁵ is attested in English in 1862 (Oxford English Dictionary) and in Spanish in 1924 (Diccionario Histórico de la Lengua Española). This metaphorical meaning is the one that has gained ground in the last years, and the one which has undergone a full process of meaning extension and recontextualization that nominates it as a keyword these days.⁶

The concept of sociopolitical keyword, in addition, relates to the broader notion of *cultural keyword* (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014; Williams 1985). According to scholars working within Cultural Linguistics, there are specific words that become culturally loaded, that is, words 'around which whole discourses are organized, [...] that govern the shared cognitive outlook of speakers and encode certain culture-specific logics, and impose on their speakers a certain interpretative grid through which they make sense of the world' (Levisen and Waters 2017: 3). Schröter et al. (2019) point out that cultural keywords tend to have a more diachronic dimension, whereas sociopolitical keywords span over shorter periods and usually relate to more thematically specific discourses. *Polarisation*, we will see, fits into this notion of a statistically frequent term that has taken on political and social significance in a short period of time, and that shows new semantic meanings and uses in various contexts, that is, it is re-contextualised from one context or domain to another.

Moreover, the idea that specific words and concepts take on political and social significance within specific contexts is clearly related to one of the most basic tenets of Socio-Cognitive approaches to discourse (Charteris-Black 2011; Hart and Lukeš 2007; Romano and Porto 2016; Romano 2024), namely that the choice of certain words in discourse reflects and reproduces specific cognitive and cultural models. So, analysing the meaning and patterns of use of a sociopolitical keyword like *polarisation* can reveal how the concept is understood by speakers and how a particular world-view on the state of affairs in politics and society is construed around it. For this reason, a first analysis of collocates of *polarisation* is complemented with an examination of its metaphorical meanings and underlying image schemas. As we will see, the conceptual mappings revealed by metaphorical expressions referring to the notion of polarisation provide a better understanding of the conceptualisation of the phenomenon by speakers and of how this concept is applied to different situations in social life that are then perceived as polarised. The notion of *range of metaphor*, i.e. the set of different source domains that a language or culture has at its disposal to conceptualise a particular target domain (Kövecses 2005), has also proved useful in providing a comprehensive picture of the cognitive and cultural models that speakers have of polarisation. As for *image schemas*, they are typically conceived as preconceptual structures that directly arise from bodily experience and the interactions with our physical environment (Johnson 1987), and also, from a wider socio-cognitive, anthropological approach, they can be considered patterns of understanding and reasoning elaborated by extension from our social interactions (Hampe 2005, Sharifian 2015). In any case, they are very basic, schematic conceptualisations that help us understand

5 <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20111121090324389>

6 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polarization>

complex ideas and concepts, as it is the case with polarisation, which is represented in terms of very elementary schematisations, such as PATH, FORCE, UP/DOWN, SPLITTING and CENTRE/PERIPHERY.

A final theoretical concept in the explanation of how the use of *polarisation* by the Spanish and British media is construing a very specific world-view of present-day political and social life, both national and international, is *framing*. Framing is defined in media research as the ability ‘to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (Entman 1993: 52). Cognitive linguists and critical discourse analysts coincide in the idea that language exists to construe reality in different ways, that is, to enable the creation and spreading of specific ideological representations (Alonso-Belmonte & Porto 2020; Koller 2014; van Dijk 1998; Verhagen 2007; Langacker 1987; Romano & Porto 2021). On this basis, metaphor and image schemas, as framing strategies, are highly efficient ‘carriers of ideology’ (Charteris-Black 2011; Goatly 2008; Hart 2021; Koller 2014) that allow to present a specific target domain in terms of different source domains, construing thus specific ideological frames. In the case of *polarisation*, as we will see, the interaction of metaphors and image schemas identified in the datasets contribute to the creation of highly negative frames in which politics, society and citizens are represented as fragmented, inescapably moving in opposite, irreconcilable directions.

3. Data and methodology

This research combines a quantitative, corpus-based approach to determine the frequency and most repeated collocations of the term *polarisation* in English and Spanish, and a qualitative analysis using the tools of Critical Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis, particularly the identification of conceptual metaphors and image schemas that shape the meaning and use of the term.

For this purpose, a corpus of news was collected from four of the most read mainstream newspapers – two Spanish and two British – during the year 2022. The intended corpus was composed of 400 news items (100 from each paper, including interviews, reports, columns, etc.), containing the word *polarización/polarisation* (and its different inflections *polarising*, *polarised*, etc.). The final corpus, however, consists of 340 items, because it was not possible to find 100 items in British newspapers. Whereas a random selection of news was performed in the Spanish papers to include only 100 in the corpus, all the texts containing the lexeme in the British ones were collected. *The Guardian* and *The Times* were chosen as two of the most popular newspapers in UK among the broadsheets or quality press,⁷ and *El País* and *El Mundo* were selected for the Spanish press, as they are

7 <https://yougov.co.uk/ratings/entertainment/popularity/newspaper/all>

the most read general newspapers on a national basis.⁸ This selection also allows for an ideological comparison, as *The Times* and *El Mundo* are both conservative, centre-right politically, whereas *El País* and *The Guardian* show a liberal, centre-left political position. Table 1 contains the final composition of the corpus. The whole texts were collected, codified with the name of the paper and a number (EM001, EM002... for *El Mundo*, EP001, EP002... for *El País*, TG001, TG002, for *The Guardian* and TT001, TT002... for *The Times*) and then uploaded to #LancsBox 6.0 corpus tool for analysis.

Language	Newspaper	Articles	Words	Occurrences of <i>polarización/polarisation</i>	Relative frequency (per 10000 words)
Spanish	<i>El Mundo</i>	100	124239	191	15.37
	<i>El País</i>	100	106723	347	32.51
British	<i>The Guardian</i>	71	81857	113	13.8
	<i>The Times</i>	69	93941	94	9.62

Table 1: Corpus size along with absolute and relative frequencies of *polarización/polarisation* in each newspaper

3.1. Quantitative analysis: frequencies and collocates

One of the tenets of this work is that the word *polarization* has extended its usage from political contexts to other broader fields, corresponding to the perceived shift from political or ideological to affective polarisation. To verify this, all the news items collected in the four newspapers were first classified by their topics into the following three categories: politics, phenomenon, and other contexts. Topics were first categorised separately by the researchers, with ambiguous cases being further discussed until agreement was reached.

a) Politics

As stated above, political polarisation has been the most widely studied area until recently. In order to first check if polarisation was regarded as a national trait of home politics (in Spain or Britain) or perceived as a more international, even global, concern, the distinction was made between:

- i) Home politics
- ii) Latin America (in Spanish press)/USA (in British press) politics
- iii) Global politics

b) Phenomenon

⁸ <https://reporting.aimc.es/index.html#/main/diarios>

Some news items deal with the concept of polarisation itself, that is, its causes, effects, extension, etc. This category was also significant to determine how polarisation is conceptualized and understood by the audience, as well as to establish the degree of concern in society with the term as reflected in the news.

c) Other contexts

This category was created to examine the degree of extension of the meaning of polarisation from politics to other fields – economy, sports, entertainment, education, religion, etc. as well as the most common patterns of usage in these contexts.

This classification facilitated a closer examination of the use of the term beyond politics in order to determine whether further senses and nuances of meaning have been incorporated, and it also revealed the pervasiveness of the concept in different aspects of public discourse.

Secondly, considering that all the texts included the word *polarización/polarisation* at least once, the relative frequency of the term was observed and compared in the four sub-corpora, one for each newspaper. As explained above, the corpus contained fewer texts in English, which already evidenced a statistical difference in the absolute frequency of occurrences. However, the relative frequency could better determine the density of the occurrence in the texts and so, the media interest for the concept.

Next, four lists of collocates with *polarización/polarisation*, one for each newspaper, were generated using the #LancsBox 6.0 corpus tool. This enabled the analysis of the semantic prosody of the term, that is, the evaluation that users give to the word, depending on what other terms are recurrently associated to it (Partington et al. 2013). Keeping the four sub-corpora separated allowed the comparison of results both in terms of country (the use of the term in British or Spanish press) and also in terms of ideology (centre-right or centre-left). For a better understanding of the significance of collocates, rather than absolute frequencies, a Mutual Information (MI) score was applied. This measure allowed us to examine the extent to which words actually co-occurred compared to the number of times they appeared separately in the corpus.

3.2. Qualitative analysis: metaphors and image schemas

The analysis of the conceptual metaphors underlying those linguistic expressions that refer to polarisation is an essential mechanism to understand how the concept is construed through discourse. So, metaphorical expressions referring to polarisation were searched for and analysed in the corpus to determine the underlying metaphorical mappings and image schemas that contribute to the shaping of the concept. For the identification of the metaphors, Stefanowitsch's (2007) metaphorical pattern analysis (MPA) was followed; a procedure which combines metaphor analysis and corpus linguistics tools. This method was considered the most appropriate for this research because the target domain is clearly represented by a spe-

cific lexeme, i.e. *polarización/polarisation*, and the metaphorical patterns associated can be easily identified by labelling the source domains of the words associated with it in the concordance lines. Besides, Stefanowitsch (2007) emphasizes the benefits of MPA for cross-linguistic research, as it focuses on individual lexical items, which are easily translatable.

Consequently, concordance lines of the keyword with a span of ten words right and left were generated in #LancsBox 6.0 corpus tool and then explored in the four subcorpora. Any terms in the lines whose basic, primary meaning belonged to a different domain than the one of the text (e.g. disease, war, animals, etc. in a text about politics) were tagged. After that, all metaphorical expressions were classified by their source domains and their main mappings analysed. Highly conventional cases of metaphorical patterns, like CLIMATE or SCENARIO OF POLARISATION, were not considered, since it would be difficult to determine a metaphorical motivation in them (Stefanowitch 2007: 68). Finally, the image schemas underlying metaphors were also analysed in order to establish the most basic patterns of thought associated to the concept.

4. Analysis and discussion of results

4.1. Contexts of usage

The classification by topics revealed that *polarisation* is mostly used when dealing with politics. As shown in Figure 1, more than half the occurrences of the word in the corpus appear in news related to the field, reaching over 70% in *The Guardian* and *El País*. When examined in detail, some interesting differences emerge. *El Mundo* and *The Times*, both conservative newspapers, deal with polarisation in home politics in about a quarter of the sub-corpora, whereas in liberal newspapers, much more attention is devoted to the perceived polarisation in other countries. Thus, *El País*, with a broad readership in Spanish-speaking countries,⁹ devotes almost half of them to the polarised scenario of politics in Latin America countries, especially in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, where election processes took place in 2022. *The Guardian*, on its side, refers to the polarised political climate in a wide range of countries, from New Zealand and Australia to Pakistan and India, as well as USA, Ireland or Scotland.

Besides, a small number of items in all four newspapers deal with political polarisation at a global scale, for example when dealing with international positions on the Russian/Ukrainian war (examples 1-2).

9 Source: PRISA <https://www.prisa.com/en/info/el-pais-1#:~:text=EL%20PA%C3%8DS%20is%20the%20top,readers%20of%20the%20print%20edition>. Of the more than 100,000 digital subscribers that the daily now has, a quarter are located outside of Spain, a reflection of EL PAÍS' position as a global reference point for information in Spanish and a sign of its potential for growth, particularly in Latin America. <https://english.elpais.com/media/2021-03-19/el-pais-now-counts-on-more-than-100000-digital-subscribers-consolidating-the-newspapers-new-model.html>

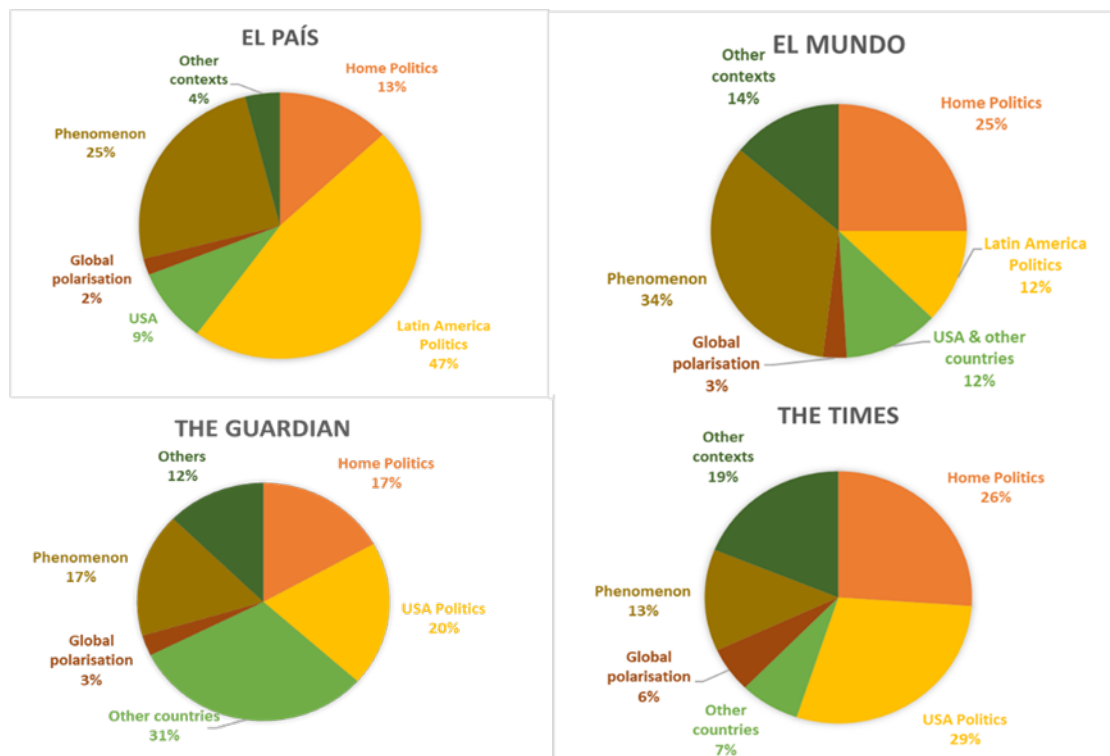


Figure1: Frequency in different contexts

- 1) The sharp polarisation between mainly western liberal democracies and the rest of the world in perceptions of Russia has been laid bare in an annual global poll of attitudes towards democracy [TG007]
- 2) Los países miembros de la OTAN han dado este miércoles en la cumbre que se celebra en Madrid considerables pasos para intentar adaptar la Alianza Atlántica a una época de turbulenta confrontación y polarización global
(‘Last Wednesday, NATO member countries at the summit held in Madrid have taken considerable steps to try to adapt the Atlantic Alliance to a time of turbulent confrontation and global polarisation’) [EP097]

Almost a quarter of the total amount of the news collected are devoted to examining the phenomenon of polarisation itself, its causes, effects and assumed escalation both in politics and in society (examples 3-4). The percentage is slightly higher in Spanish newspapers and it amounts to 34% in *El Mundo*. This can be seen as a way to measure the public concern about the concept, perceived as a growing threat.

- 3) What people see are threats more than promises. Climate change is a threat, artificial intelligence is a threat, increasing polarisation is a threat [TT068]
- 4) La polarización en los medios y en la política han ayudado a contribuir a un ecosistema informativo en el que ha dejado de existir una realidad común

(‘Polarisation in the media and politics has helped contribution to an information ecosystem in which a common reality no longer exists’) [EM011]

Significantly, though, there is a considerable number of occurrences (only lower in *El País*) in news about other general topics, including sports, education, economy or even religion and architecture (examples 5-7)

- 5) Unfortunately, our society is rapidly moving towards polarization between believers in God and non-believers [TG021]
- 6) Hay una gran polarización en la educación española que es inusual [graduates vs. dropouts]
(‘There is a great polarisation in Spanish education that is unusual’ [graduates vs. dropouts]) [EM045]
- 7) There will be “extreme polarisation” between eco-friendly, modern offices and older blocks [TT047]

This expansion of the expression beyond the limits of political discourse, even if not a major frequency, is particularly relevant, since it can be seen as a sign of an ongoing process of semantic extension, as well as a conceptual transition from political polarisation to the so-called affective polarisation.

4.2. Frequency and collocations

A first observation regarding frequencies reveals that Spanish newspapers are more prone to use the word *polarisation* in their texts. As indicated, more news items containing the lexeme were found in Spanish newspapers during the corpus collection stage. As for the relative frequency of the term in the texts, there are also remarkable differences. Table 1 shows a strikingly high relative frequency in *El País*, twice as much as *El Mundo* and *The Guardian* and thrice than in *The Times*. Conversely, the number of occurrences in *The Times* subcorpus is particularly low.

The interpretation of these differences is closely related with the contexts of use, i.e., the topic of the news items in which the word was used. As stated in the previous section, almost half of the news containing the word in *El País* deal with politics in Latin American countries, paying particular attention to the 2022 elections that took place in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. These socio-political contexts are qualified as highly polarised, which can provide a reasonable explanation for the high frequency of the term, both in absolute and relative terms. Besides, there are more texts in both *El País* and *El Mundo* devoted to the explanation of the concept itself than in the British subcorpora, which can also explain the differences in frequency rates (see Figure 1). On the other side, we observe that *The Times* includes the lowest number of both articles and instances within the texts. Maybe these low figures can be related to the fact that this newspaper does not seem to be as interested in the explanation of

the phenomenon per se (only 13% of texts deal with it) nor in foreign political polarisation. In fact, both right-wing papers, *El Mundo* and *The Times*, tend to be more focused on polarisation in home politics. The most relevant collocations in the four subcorpora are displayed in Table 2, after function words were deleted and MI score was applied,¹⁰ to ensure the final lists of frequent associations were significant enough.

Results show a sort of discourse prosody that discloses the main concerns in each country about the phenomenon of polarisation in their societies. All newspapers seem to agree that polarisation is intense (see collocates *extreme/extrema*, *growing*, *increasingly*, *medir* 'measure', *grande* 'big', *volumen* 'volume') and worrying (*threat*, *worried*), and they often deal with its possible causes and effects as revealed in collocates such as *media/mediática*, *populism* and *posverdad* 'post-truth'. It is noteworthy that British newspapers still link present polarisation to the Brexit in 2016; a fact that is even more noticeable in *The Guardian* (examples 8 and 9).

- 8) Your most visceral experience of politics will have been the opposite of consensus and harmony: the seething polarisation triggered by Brexit... [TG021]
- 9) ...was caught in a "vortex" of wider issues including Britain's political polarisation following Brexit... [TT054]

Moreover, in British newspapers, the concept is still closely related to the field of politics, with the collocates *populism*, *politics* and *political* among the first ten, whereas the first and second collocate in the Spanish ones is *afectiva* 'affective'. In fact, Spanish subcorpora reveal a major concern about the effects on society, shown in the relevance of collocates like *afectiva* 'affective', *fragmentación* 'fragmentation', *division* 'division', *confrontación* 'confrontation', *discordia* 'disagreement', *clima* 'climate', *respeto* 'respect' and *felices* 'happy'.

A more specific view on evaluative prosody is provided by a small number of fixed expressions in the form of binomials, a special case of collocations that are repeated both in the English and Spanish corpora. Examples are *polarisation and disagreement*, *division and polarisation*, *polarización y crispación* ('polarisation and tension') and *polarisation and populism* (examples 10 and 11).

- 10) ...con el problema añadido de la *crispación y de la polarización* sociales que tenemos y que me parece peligrosísimo
(...with the added problem of the social *tension and polarisation* that we have and which seems to me very dangerous') [EM057]
- 11) Yet despite this, asylum remains one of the policy areas most fraught with *division and polarisation* [TG007]

10 Statistic value 5, 7 words right/left span and 3 minimum collocation frequency

Rank	The Times Collocate	MI	The Guardian Collocate	MI	El Mundo Collocate	MI	El País Collocate	MI
1	challenged	9.02	partisan	7.91	<i>afectiva</i> ('affective')	9.12	<i>políticos</i> (political scientists')	8.25
2	extreme	8.85	worried	7.62	<i>fragmentación</i> ('fragmentation')	7.92	<i>afectiva</i> ('affective')	8.25
3	populism	8.56	remains	7.32	<i>extrema</i> ('extreme')	7.8	<i>antídoto</i> ('antidote')	8.03
4	increasingly	7.76	political	7.18	<i>división</i> ('division')	7.25	<i>felices</i> ('happy')	7.84
5	nation	7.7	extreme	7.1	<i>confrontación</i> ('confrontation')	7.22	<i>medir</i> ('measure')	7.84
6	growing	7.39	step	7.08	<i>discursos</i> ('discourses')	7.17	<i>mediática</i> ('media')	7.84
7	political	7.31	Scottish	6.99	<i>diálogo</i> ('dialogue')	7.17	<i>observamos</i> ('we observe')	7.84
8	opinion	7.15	despite	6.97	<i>respeto</i> ('respect')	7.12	<i>discordia</i> (disagreement)	7.67
9	society	7.02	especially	6.83	<i>vivimos</i> ('we live')	7.02	<i>contenidos</i> (contents')	7.51
10	politics	6.83	shows	6.83	<i>clima</i> ('climate')	6.88	Klein	7.51
11	threat	6.8	2016	6.69	<i>sociedad</i> ('society')	6.77	<i>señalan</i> ('point out')	7.51
12	debate	6.74	politics	6.65	<i>electorado</i> ('electorate')	6.75	<i>refleja</i> ('reflect')	7.44
13	culture	6.48	within	6.56	<i>grande</i> ('big')	6.75	<i>volumen</i> ('volume')	7.25
14	future	6.4	communities	6.38	<i>necesario</i> ('necessary')	6.75	<i>ideológica</i> (ideological')	7.25
15	America	6.29	felt	6.32	<i>causa</i> ('cause')	6.68	<i>seguirá</i> ('will keep on')	7.25
16	called	6.11	research	6.17	<i>cultural</i> ('cultural')	6.68	<i>dinámica</i> (dynamic')	7.08
17	think	5.86	Brexit	6.08	<i>ambiente</i> ('environment')	6.53	<i>intensa</i> ('intense')	7.03
18	become	5.75	culture	6.08	<i>bandera</i> ('flag')	6.43	<i>clima</i> ('climate')	7.03
19	UK	5.68	university	6.08	<i>institucional</i> ('institutional')	6.4	<i>posverdad</i> ('post-truth')	6.93
20	media	5.63	less	6.07	<i>crispación</i> ('tension')	6.28	<i>fractura</i> ('breach')	6.84

Table 2: collocations of *polarización/polarisation*, rank ordered by MI score

In fact, what can be seen all through the corpus is a constant association of the lexeme *polarisation* with an array of negative terms, not only those that could be considered quasi-synonyms, like *radicalism*, *division*, *fragmentation* or *disagreement*, but also linked to apparently disparate concepts that are widely rejected by society like *corruption*, *violence*, *hate*, *post-truth*,

mistrust, prejudice, disinformation, inequality, or incertidumbre ‘uncertainty’. Quite often, this association takes the form of long chains of undesirable conditions that are presented together, syntactically juxtaposed (examples 12 and 13) and, interestingly, this effect is sometimes reinforced with phonetic alliteration, both in English and Spanish (examples 14 and 15):

- 12) estamos listos para apoyar este gobierno de cambio que nos llevará a superar la *desigualdad, la violencia, la corrupción y la polarización*
(‘We are ready to support this government of change that will lead us to overcome *inequality, violence, corruption and polarisation*’) [EP093]
- 13) The result, as we can see all around us, is a disastrous confluence of *polarisation, militarism, democratic dysfunction, and environmental disregard* [TG002]
- 14) What’s missing is an intellectual grasp of what is required to run the country in an era of increased *polarisation, protectionism and populism* amplified by social media [TT011]
- 15) El pensador venezolano sostiene que las autocracias se han impuesto en el mundo [...] a base de una combinación perversa de lo que denomina las tres ‘p’: *populismo, polarización y posverdad*
(‘The Venezuelan thinker maintains that autocracies have prevailed in the world [...] by means of a perverse combination of the so-called the three ‘p’ (-words): *populism, polarisation and post-truth*’) [EP035]

The effect produced by this constant association to negative, socially rejected ideas is one of cognitive categorization and accumulation. That is, if polarisation is grouped with other social evils, they all belong to the same category and sum up to result in a multifaceted threat to welfare and harmony.

4.3. Conceptual metaphors

Polarisation has shown to be a highly complex, multifaceted concept that is conceptualized by means of a set of different source domains, which provide a better understanding of different aspects in it. The range of metaphor, i.e., the different source domains that are mapped onto the same target domain, can help to explain how the concept is construed by speakers. Figure 2 shows the range of metaphor of POLARISATION with some of the most productive source domains that occur in the corpus in both languages: ENEMY, DISEASE/VIRUS, (NATURAL)CATASTROPHE, TRAP and OBSTACLE.

One of the most salient conceptual metaphors identified in the datasets is POLARISATION IS AN ENEMY. WAR metaphors, we know, are prolific discursive strategies as “they capture people’s attention, trigger emotional responses, tap into a rich source of schematic knowledge, and lead people to take a stand and form particular opinions on a wide range of issues” (Flusberg et al. 2018: 9). Examples 16 to 18 show a war scenario where the enemy, polarisa-

tion, *kills, invades, gains ground* and has to be *fought*. Example 18 is particularly noteworthy as it provides a very specific cultural context, where the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) is activated.



Figure 2: Range of metaphor for POLARISATION

- 16) La extrema polarización puede *matar* las democracias
(‘Extreme polarisation can *kill* democracies’) [EM038]
- 17) As a bitter argument raged on social media, the society said it was “no time to *surrender* to polarisation and hate” [TT020]
- 18) [...] conductas que en la sociedad no son buenas, como son esta polarización, estas *trincheras* o este volver a un *guerracivilismo* que parece que nos *invade* de una manera tremenda, y el que no opine como tú es tu *enemigo*
(‘[...] behaviours that are not good in society, such as this polarisation, these *trenches* or this returning to a *civil war* that seems to invade us in a tremendous way, and those who do not think like you are your *enemy*’) [EM033]

Another common source domain deployed in the conceptualization of POLARISATION is VIRUS and/or DISEASE (examples 19 to 21). The main features highlighted in this metaphor are the fact that it is dangerous and that it spreads rapidly in society, like a contagious virus, and so, an *antidote* for it is desperately needed (example 21). This source domain is probably triggered by the recent pandemics of Covid-19, still active in speakers’ and readers’ minds.

- 19) Polarisation spread like a *virus*. When, in the summer of 2016 the UK voted by the narrowest of margins to leave the European Union [TT065]
- 20) Esa “polarización afectiva” de la que hablaba antes Mariano Torcal ha sido la gran *epidemia* política de los últimos tiempos

(‘That “affective polarisation”, that Mariano Torcal mentioned before, has been the *great political epidemic* of recent times’) [EM010]

- 21) Macron would be a desperately needed *antidote* to political polarisation [TG015]

Another construal of polarisation worth mentioning is triggered by the source domain NATURAL CATASTROPHES/FORCES (flooding, volcanos and arsons). Example 22, for instance, shows a conceptualization of polarisation as (dangerous) water flowing and flooding the country. In examples 23 and 24 the source domain recalls the danger of another natural force, volcanoes, whose lava *seethes* and *solidifies* like polarisation. Finally, a dangerous fire or arson is projected in example 25.

- 22) La gran polarización en la que se ha *sumergido* el país con motivo de las elecciones legislativas de medio mandato han hecho saltar las alarmas
(‘The great polarisation in which the country has been *immersed* due to the mid-term legislative elections has set off alarms’) [EM008]
- 23) “There’s so much to talk about,” especially as another recession looms and political polarisation *solidifies* [TG041]
- 24) Your most visceral experience of politics will have been the opposite of consensus and harmony: the *seething* polarisation triggered by Brexit [TG023]
- 25) [...] but *fuels* the very polarisation that they claim to want to put behind them and accuse others of perpetuating [TT039]

Polarisation is also conceptualized as a dangerous TRAP we are being *lured into* or a *cage* we need to *escape from* by *breaking its chains* (examples 26–29).

- 26) We risk being *trapped* in a dangerous and decadent tyranny of binaries [TG002]
- 27) We need together to *step beyond* the lures of polarisation [TG060]
- 28) [...] tratando de *escapar* de la jaula de la polarización
(‘[...] trying to *escape* the cage of polarisation’) [EP007]
- 29) *Romper las cadenas* de la polarización y desinformación en América Latina constituye un área de oportunidad
(‘*Breaking the chains* of polarisation and misinformation in Latin America constitutes an area of opportunity’) [EP015]

A last significant metaphor in the data is POLARISATION IS AN OBSTACLE, which presents the concept as a real, physical barrier that hinders decisions and advances (examples 30 and 31).

- 30) [...] the asymmetric polarisation of the American political right that today serves as such a formidable *obstacle* to meaningful action on climate [TG020]

- 31) [...] la toma de importantes decisiones gubernamentales se ve *bloqueada* por la polarización que se nutre de las identidades grupales: religión, raza, género, región, edad
 ('... important government decision-making is *blocked* by the polarisation that is nourished by group identities: religion, race, gender, region, age') [EP031]

Other minor conceptual metaphors appearing in the datasets show polarisation as a DRUG (32), a BEAST fed by politicians (33), or even as profitable INVESTMENT (34); this last example with a clear negative sense as it is phrased as a critical remark. Note that example 34 includes another metaphor, STORM, which does not refer to polarisation, but to the political situation in which polarisation is only one factor among many others.

- 32) Polarización: la *droga* que arrasa en las citas navideñas
 ('Polarisation: the *drug* that sweeps at Christmas days') [EP011]
 33) the row over ...controversial emails linked to Biden's son [...] is *feeding* polarization of US politics [TT017]
 34) Ésta es la tormenta perfecta: "En primer lugar, unas élites políticas que piensan que polarizar es una *estrategia rentable*"
 ('This is the perfect storm: "First, political elites who think that polarizing is a *profitable strategy*") [EM007]

In short, the concept of polarisation conveyed by these metaphors is highly negative. All the source domains building the range of metaphor of the term refer to damaging or undesirable domains (diseases, natural disasters, war, etc.), so the general worldview or frame construed by the mass media is that of a constant threat, danger, conflict and confrontation.

4.4. Image schemas

The image schemas found in the corpus complement the negative perception provided by the different conceptual metaphors analysed in the previous section. As preconceptual structures arising from bodily experience and related to social interaction, image schemas are also powerful strategies for the understanding of complex concepts, such as polarisation, and their ideological functions.

A first image schema that contributes to the idea that political and social consensus cannot be reached and that different opinions cannot be negotiated is the CENTRE – PERIPHERY schema, as represented in Figure 3. In this schema, the centre is perceived as the essential, most important part and the periphery as something secondary or expendable. The origin of this image schema is clearly embodied, as it is the core human organs, such as the heart and the lungs, that are vital to life in contrast to the more peripheral limbs (arms, feet, fingers), and so the centre is more positively evaluated than the periphery. Consequently, in the meta-

phor IDEOLOGY IS SPACE and IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES ARE SPATIAL DISTANCE (Figure 4), the extremes (extreme-right, extreme-left parties) are usually negatively evaluated.

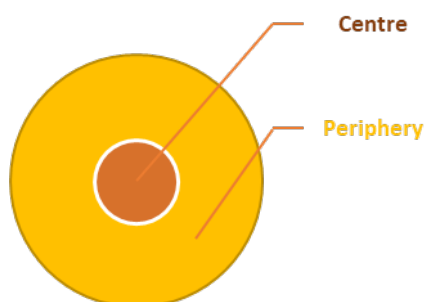


Figure 3: CENTRE – PERIPHERY image schema



Figure 4: IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES ARE SPATIAL DISTANCE

Thus, the frequent collocates *extreme*, *radical*, *ideological extremism*, etc. activate this image schema and contribute to the negative characterization of polarisation. A second image schema that construes the concept is VERTICALITY. Polarisation is represented as *growing*, *increasing*, *máxima* ‘maximum’, *enorme* ‘enormous’, *intense*, *high*, etc. These collocates also help to build the danger frame in an UP-DOWN vertical axis where MORE IS UP and LESS IS DOWN, which projects the axiological-evaluative meaning: more polarisation, i.e., UP, is bad and less, DOWN, is good.



Figure 5: SPLITTING image schema

A third image schema appearing in the corpus is SPLITTING, visually represented in Figure 5, which shows two forces moving in opposite directions, creating a deep physical rift between them that makes it impossible for the two ends to meet. This schema impinges on the irreconcilable nature of ideas or social groups. Polarisation, we are told, brings *división* ‘division’, *desconexión* ‘disconnection’, *fragmentación* ‘fragmentation’ and is *deepening* (examples 35-38).¹¹ Interestingly, in Latin American Spanish, polarisation is usually referred to as *la grieta* ‘the rift’ (example 38), which enhances this image schema and its representation as a geological rift that cannot be bridged.

11 Notice how *deepening* (example 36) and *cavar* ‘dig’ (example 37) both necessarily merge the SPLITTING and UP-DOWN schema.

- 35) Britain more *split* than ever on fate of the Union (...), a polling expert has warned after research shows that Britain is more polarised than ever over Scottish independence [TT001]
- 36) [...] do these elections really signify the return of some sort of normal equilibrium in American politics, or merely a temporary respite from chaos and *deepening* polarisation? [TT031]
- 37) *Cavar* la polarización [...] es el objetivo de Sánchez
(“To dig polarisation (...) is Sánchez’s main aim”) [EM061]
- 38) [...] el “progresivo crecimiento de una *grieta*” social por la polarización política, las tensiones sociales, las consecuencias de la crisis económica y, en algunos casos, la violencia. “La *grieta* está en todas partes y trasciende generaciones”
(“[...] the “progressive growth of a social *rift*” due to political polarisation, social tensions, the consequences of the economic crisis and, in some cases, violence. “The *rift* is everywhere and transcends generations”) [EP042]

5. Conclusions

The analysis of frequencies and uses of *polarización/polarisation* in the British and Spanish press reveals that *polarisation* is a good example of socio-political keyword. That is, a ‘superword’ with enhanced meanings, ideologically loaded and that can be strategically used to negatively frame the whole discourse in completely different areas –political, educational, economic, etc. The term ‘superword’ was inspired by Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2023) in a dissemination article about some everyday words that are specially frequent and persuasive, and that reflect the worldview of the users.

In response to our first research question about the evolution of meanings and new patterns of use, a good number of occurrences of the term is found in fields other than politics, which shows that a semantic extension of the term is taking place in both languages. Only *El País* seems to show a more reduced range of topics. The lexeme is, therefore, being recontextualized from its main domain of usage, politics, to a great array of contexts including economy, sports, entertainment, education, religion, and architecture, among others. Besides, both English and Spanish subcorpora show strong associations to negative concepts. Metaphors, images schemas and cognitive categorizations occurring in long chains of juxtaposed terms contribute to the conceptualization of polarisation as a great danger, a threat that must be confronted and eliminated, as would be done with an enemy or a virus, since the term puts distance between participants, establishing a deep gap between them and hindering any possibility of dialogue and or agreement.

As for the second research question, we have observed that there are many similarities in the meaning development and patterns of use of the lexeme *polarisation* in Spain and Britain, which confirms that it is not just a local phenomenon. The contexts of use are similar in both the English and Spanish subcorpora and there seems to be a great concern about the phe-

nomenon in both languages. However, the worries are more apparent in Spanish, where frequencies of use, both absolute and relative, are higher, and where a higher percentage of news items is devoted to the analysis of the phenomenon *per se*. Moreover, the list of collocates shows that, whereas the British press mostly deals with political polarisation as a consequence of populism and Brexit, Spanish newspapers give more emphasis to its consequences, i.e., a fragmented, tensioned society. This means that the transition from political to affective polarisation is more present in Spain. The gradual shift from political to affective polarisation and the emphasis on its actual effects in social harmony can be seen in example 39.

- 39) Una señora [...] lloró en cámara y describió entre lágrimas y de forma muy cruda el impacto de la polarización política - conocida en Argentina como "*grieta*" - en su familia: "Mis dos hijos son de Cristina, pero mis dos hijas son de Macri. ¡Me agreden, no me hablan! [...]"
 ('A woman [...] cried on camera and described in tears and in a very crude way the impact of political polarisation - known in Argentina as "*rift*" - on her family: "My two children are Cristina's, but my two daughters belong to Macri."¹² They attack me, they don't talk to me! [...]) [EM066]

In terms of ideological differences between the newspapers, we have observed that conservative newspapers, *The Times* and *El Mundo*, are more focused on local, national polarisation, whereas *El País* and *The Guardian* pay more attention to foreign political polarisation. Maybe the liberal newspapers are more interested in foreign politics in general, but this would deserve further research.

As a result, and in response to the third research question, the frequent use of the term in the press produces significant framing effects. The negative evaluation associated to the term, as a consequence of the patterns of use described above, provides a negative semantic prosody, a "consistent aura of meaning" (Louw 1993: 157) that impinges on the whole context. Thus, when the word is used in a news item, the frames of danger, alarm and threat are activated and only its negative effects are enhanced. It is in this sense that we can say *polarisation* is a superword, because only by including it in a text, a whole cognitive model is triggered that frames the events presented in it. Any topic, sports, education, arts, religion, etc. is instantly construed negatively when referred to as 'polarised', implying that no negotiation or understanding can be reached.

Considering all the above, it is not by chance that *polarization* has been chosen as the Word of the Year 2024 by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and also the Word of the Year 2023 in Spain by the FundéuRAE, the Foundation of Urgent Spanish, created in collaboration with the Royal Spanish Academy, and whose main aim is to promote the good use of

12 Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Mauricio Macri, former presidents of Argentina.

Spanish in the media.¹³ *Polarisation* not only has a pervasive presence in the mass media, but it also shows an ongoing process of semantic extension and recontextualization that will deserve further attention in the near future, considering the effects of its frequent use in real life worldwide. Fighting such a polarized media, and hence society, seems to be urgent today, and this implies a first understanding of how the term is being used; that is, analyzing its discursive meanings and uses.

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Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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