



Pronouns separating the
UK from the EU: *We* and
us in British newspapers
and parliamentary
debates in 1973–2015

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The author defended her doctoral dissertation *Pronouns separating the UK from the EU: We and us in British newspapers and parliamentary debates in 1973–2015* (Tampere University Dissertations 989) at the Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences of Tampere University on 19 April 2024. The opponent at the public defence was Professor Gerlinde Mautner (Vienna University of Economics and Business), and the defence was chaired by Professor Päivi Pahta (Tampere University). The following is the introductory talk delivered at the start of the viva.

1. Introduction

Do you remember what happened eight years ago, in 2016?

It was the year when *Pokémon Go* was released, and we started to see people, young and old, gathered outside with phones in their hands. It was the year when the Panama papers were published, providing detailed information on more than 200,000 offshore companies. It was also the year when Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. This, for many, was further evidence of the spread of populism in Western societies. I say “further” evidence of the spread of populism, because that year, the year 2016, was also the year of Brexit.

In June 2016, a majority of the British voted for leaving the European Union. The result of the Brexit referendum was a big surprise at least for many of us living in Finland. Here, in Finland, it was difficult for us to understand that such a central member of the EU would want to leave. While many of us in Finland felt that the EU secured our future as a Western country, the situation in the United Kingdom was somewhat different. The UK had always been part of the West, which meant that the EU was not needed for that purpose. In fact, Eurosceptics in the EU metaphorically described the EU as a prison, where the UK was shackled and prevented from making its own decisions (Räikkönen 2020).

Today we will not focus on Brexit that much, however, but more on what had happened before that. On issues that may have caused that the EU was not seen as being useful for the UK.

We will focus on language. On such language use that may have influenced British people's world view so that they thought that the EU is not "here", but somewhere else, separate from "us".

2. British Euroscepticism

The relationship between the UK and the EU was never problem-free. In its history the UK has been a significant military and colonial power. However, being a member of the European Union meant that the UK could not alone decide how it would act internationally, as it always had to consider what the EU was going to do. This meant that the UK was not "special" anymore, as it had to submit to being just another European country. And being just another European country never really fitted in the British national identity. In contrast, the image of the UK standing alone has been an important part of how the British see themselves (Wallace 2017).

There is certainly Euroscepticism and national pride in Finland, as well. Here, as in other EU countries, plans to deepen European integration always face opposition. And in fact, it is important that the EU is critically discussed, as critical discussion is an integral part of democratic societies. However, previous research has stated that the British version of Euroscepticism was different compared to other countries. It was more radical. The British sceptics were skeptical about whether the UK was European at all (Hawkins 2022: 20). Furthermore, the British Euroscepticism became part of the mainstream politics, which has not happened in other EU countries, at least not yet (*ibid.*: 21). And, as we know, the result of this was that by 2016 a significant number of British were ready to leave the EU.

To those that had studied the relations between the UK and the EU, and how the EU had been represented and talked about in the UK, the situation was not that surprising. From previous research we know that the UK was not particularly enthusiastic about the EU. There were British politicians and other actors that had already for decades campaigned for the UK to leave the EU before the Brexit referendum was even a topic (e.g. Forster 2002: 21).

When I started planning my PhD project in 2017, Brexit referendum had just been held the previous year. In 2016 I was finishing up my master's thesis in which I studied how immigrants were talked about in the British

parliamentary debates (Riihimäki 2016). When studying the debates on immigration, I noticed that the EU seemed to have a crucial role in the discussion. What especially struck me then was that the speakers often talked about there being a difference between what “we”, the British, want to do and what the EU tells us to do. In addition, descriptions of how “we” are different from “them” – the rest of the EU – were prominent.

Therefore, after the Brexit referendum, I knew there would be lots of interesting things in the political language that could give us more information about this historical event and why the British voted for leaving the EU. Thus, I made it my purpose to find out how linguistics could contribute to the research on Brexit.

3. Personal pronouns in political discourse

My dissertation focuses on the use of the pronouns *we* and *us* in British parliamentary debates and newspapers. I analysed the use of *we* and *us* in contexts where the EU was being talked about and when these pronouns were used in relation to the EU.

Before going into the study in more detail, I first want to talk about the importance of the pronoun *we*. Why study the pronouns *we* and *us* in political discourse? Or, in a more general level, why is language important when we think about politics and issues that shape our world view?

Analysing the language use of those in power is extremely important. Social structures are reflected in language and particular ways of using language influence and even shape social structures (Fairclough, Mulderring & Wodak 2011). Thus, the language use of those that hold a public office is never insignificant. The language of those in power always has a potential of changing our world view.

But, one could ask, why spend time studying such small words as personal pronouns? We do not even notice them. They are automatic. They are not significant. Right?

In everyday talk, personal pronouns might be more or less automatic. When I talk to someone, I refer to them as *you*. How are *you* doing? What are *you* going to do today? When I talk to my friend, for instance, I do not usually give pronouns much thought. But, in political language, such as in political

speeches that have been prepared beforehand, using one personal pronoun instead of another is not automatic. Or even if it was automatic, taking a closer look at the personal pronouns can inform us of the world view of the speaker.

In political language, the first-person plural pronoun *we* is a rhetorical tool that offers speakers many possibilities. For instance, it can be used to obscure who is responsible for the outcomes of bad decisions. More importantly, *we* can be used to make a separation between “us” and “them”. It can be used to include and to exclude.

The dissertation focuses on the use of the pronouns *we* and *us* in EU-related discussion in the UK. In particular, I examined contexts where the pronouns were used to refer either to the UK or the EU. Let me give you an example where *we* is used to refer to the UK. Example (1) is from *the Daily Mail*, from an article that was published in 2005.

1. Britain is a European power by virtue of geography. When Europe is sick, **we** suffer. In terms of international economic competitiveness, Europe is sick and **we** are chained to the bedside. (*Daily Mail*, 15 May 2005; emphases mine)

Note that *Europe* and *the EU* are often used interchangeably, at least in the UK. In (1), the pronoun *we* refers to the UK. This example gives the impression that the UK is not part of Europe. We, the British, are closely connected to it, but not part of it. Thus, the UK is separated from Europe and the EU.

The pronoun *we* can also be used to unite the UK and the EU by using it to refer to the whole EU, causing that the EU is seen as acting together. Let me give you an example where this is done. Example (2) is from the *Guardian*, from 2015.

2. **We** have created a single market with free movement of people, goods and services and capital. **We** have preserved peace within the union for over 50 years. (*Guardian*, 3 July 2015; emphases mine)

In (2), *we* refers to the EU, and the image of the EU is very positive and different from the previous example. Thus, examining these pronouns and their context can reveal interesting things about how the EU is represented.

When the pronoun *we* is used, descriptions of who “we” are and how “we” act are often present. The representations of “us” can tell us quite a bit about our national identity and hence, what is the desired future for us (Reicher & Hopkins 2001). Therefore, the use of *we* and *us* in British political language and how “we” are defined in relation to the EU seemed to me very important. These pronouns could potentially give us more information on why the British did not see the EU membership being in their interests.

4. Data and methods

In my PhD dissertation, I examined how the pronouns *we* and *us* were used in relation to the EU in British political discourse. I wanted to know how the use of these pronouns changed within the time period that I studied, and how the UK and the EU were represented when these pronouns were used.

I used two different sets of data. The first set of data consists of the British parliamentary debates from the time period between 1973 and 2015. This period covers almost all the UK’s membership years before the Brexit referendum.

The second set of data consists of 940 EU-related newspaper articles from four different British newspapers: the *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail*.

In these two data sets, I looked for instances of the pronouns *we* and *us* that were used in EU-related discussions and analysed their use quantitatively, focusing on frequencies and other statistical measures, and qualitatively, with a more detailed look, focusing on how these pronouns were used in their co-text.

The dissertation contains four empirical studies, each analysing a different aspect relating to the use of the pronouns *we* and *us* in the data.

Next, I will present the main findings of each of the four empirical studies.

5. Findings

The main finding in the first empirical study (Räikkönen 2023) is that, before the Brexit referendum, the pronouns *we* and *us* were increasingly used to refer to the UK and decreasingly to refer to the EU in the parliamentary debates. Therefore, the debates became more and more focused on how “we” in the UK should react to the decisions made in the EU – on how the EU’s decisions affect “us”, the British. Consequently, the focus was less and less on the EU’s processes and on what “we”, the EU, were going to do together.

In the second study (Riihimäki 2019), I wanted to know how the UK, as a member of the EU, was represented in the parliamentary debates. I found out that the UK was often represented as being a leader in the EU and as more rational than the continental countries. Thus, the UK’s job was to lead others and be at the heart of Europe. However, at the same time, the UK wanted to stay out of many of the developments in the EU that would have meant losing more parliamentary sovereignty. This caused that there were concerns of whether we can lead in the EU if we do not move forward with others. What is our role in the EU if we cannot sit in the table where, for instance, economic and monetary policies are discussed? Thus, there was insecurity of our role in the EU.

In the third empirical study (Räikkönen 2022), I analysed the use of the pronouns in the newspaper data. One of the main findings in the third study was that the newspapers supporting the political right almost never reported EU issues from the EU’s perspective. Thus, the focus typically was on how the decisions made in the EU affect us, the British, and how we should react to them. The left-wing papers, in contrast, used the pronouns more evenly to refer to both the UK and the EU and thus included the EU’s perspective, as well.

In the fourth and final empirical study (Räikkönen 2024), I focused on contexts in which the EU was the ingroup. That is, on contexts where the pronouns *we* and *us* were used to refer to the whole EU in the parliamentary data and the newspaper data. The main finding of the fourth empirical study was that using *we* and *us* to refer to the EU was rare in both datasets. However, when the EU was the ingroup – and referred to by *we* or *us* – the EU was typically talked in a positive or at least neutral manner. It was commonly represented as a co-operation where countries work together. Furthermore,

the focus often was on the processes of the EU instead of on how the EU's actions affect the nation.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the four empirical studies, I argue that the image of the EU in British newspapers and parliamentary debates was mostly negative. The focus of EU-related political discussions was often on how “we”, the British, are affected by the EU, instead of on what “we” in the EU are doing together. Furthermore, based on the data that were studied, leaving the EU was a possibility for the UK from the very start of the UK's membership.

I would like to conclude the lectio by not focusing on the past but by talking about the future.

European elections are coming up in June 2024. In his closing statement in the European parliament in December 2023, the European Commissioner for Economy, Paolo Gentiloni, emphasized that, perhaps for the first time, we Europeans will have a chance to make *our* voice heard on fundamental European questions. First, on where the EU is going. Second, on *our* support for Ukraine and, finally, on *our* climate ambition.

Problems that we face today require international co-operation, be it within the EU or in other contexts. Focusing only on what would be best for my country is not sustainable anymore, if it ever was. **N**

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