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Can political rhetoric ever be "too persuasive"? The combination of proverb and hyperbole in the case of *having the cake and eating it*

Can the use of linguistic devices to achieve persuasion, such as metaphor, irony and hyperbole, ever be "too persuasive", i.e., overshoot its rhetorical aim? More specifically, can the combination of such devices be "too much of a good thing" in that it commits speakers (and approving hearers) to actions that they were not part of their persuasion intentions? This paper investigates the semantic and pragmatic development of the Brexit-related applications of the metaphorical proverb, *You cannot have your cake and eat it*, during 2016–2019 in British public discourse. At the start of that period, the proverb's reversal into the assertion "We can have our cake and eat it!" by the then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and other "Brexiteers" became a highly prominent endorsement of Brexit and its supposed benefits for the UK; it even temporarily set the agenda for the public perception of UK–EU negotiations. Over time it became an object of hyperbolic praise as well as derision and recently seems to have lost much of its persuasive force. The paper argues that the proverb's new reversed application by Johnson was initially successful in reviving its metaphorical meaning and framing it in a hyperbolic rhetorical context but that it also pushed Brexit proponents to an "all-or-nothing" outcome of the conflict narrative, both vis-à-vis the EU and within the British political debate. Thus, rhetorical success can lead to argumentative (and political) commitments that may have been not foreseen by the speaker and may run counter to their persuasive interests.

Key words: argumentation; discourse; hyperbole; metaphor; persuasion; proverb.

1. Introduction

On the day after the 2019 European Parliament elections, the left-leaning British tabloid newspaper *Daily Mirror* described the outcome in Britain as the "collapse" of the "Brexit cake" and its diffusion into two extreme directions:

(1) In last night's European elections, the Brexit cake finally collapsed in the oven. And the doughy gloop of support slid out in two directions - either to vehement pro-Brexit parties, or parties that are vehemently against it. (*Daily Mirror,* 27 May 2019).

The metaphorical labelling of an election result as *a cake that has slumped in the oven and let out its dough in opposite directions* is a grotesque caricature of the political impasse resulting from an election that had not even been supposed to take place in the United Kingdom. The ruling Conservative Party government had promised to take Britain out of the European Union ("Brexit") by the end of March 2019 but had failed to gain a parliamentary majority for the Treaty it had negotiated with the EU. In consequence, they asked for (and were granted by the EU) a postponement of the actual withdrawal until the end of October 2019; hence the country still participated in the EU-wide elections in May that year. The outcome was disastrous for the two major British parliamentary parties, the Conservatives and Labour, which each lost over 10% of their previous share of the vote and ended up in third (Labour) and fifth place (Conservatives), behind the frontrunners, i.e. the recently formed, unequivocally pro-Brexit "Brexit Party" (30.5%) and the equally unambiguously anti-Brexit "Liberal Democrats" (19.6%).

The analogy between these divergent tendencies and the two streams of unbaked dough in the *Mirror*-comment is fairly obvious, but the motivation for metaphorically referring to Brexit (and/or the Brexit-dominated 2019 EU-election in Britain) as a *cake* remains to be explained with regard to its origins and the implicit claim that the way in which Brexit was prepared and debated in public led to a disastrous outcome. The Brexit debate is thus viewed as a test case of how political persuasion can yield unexpected and dysfunctional end results, despite a seemingly promising combination of rhetorical techniques by the proponents of a particular policy. Here we will focus on the combination of metaphor and hyperbole, which at first sight may seem to be ideally suited to support persuasive and polemical strategies in political discourse (Blain 1988; Musolff 2010: 17–19; Burgers, Konijn & Steen 2016; Burgers, Brugman, Renardel de Lavalette & Steen 2016; Kalkhoven & de Landtsheer 2016).

First, we study the semantic and pragmatic development of the Brexit-related applications of the metaphorical proverb, *You cannot have your cake and eat it*, which was famously turned into the assertion *We can have our cake and eat it!* by the then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson in 2016. In his and other "Brexiteers" usage, it became a highly prominent endorsement of Brexit and its supposed benefits for the UK, which was repeated, alluded to, and reinterpreted time and again. Over time, it became an object of hyperbolic praise as well as derision, and by 2019 it seems to have lost much of its persuasive force, whilst still serving as a reference point for allusions such as (1). The paper charts how Johnson's "reversed" proverb application initially succeeded in combining a revived metaphor with a hyperbolic evaluation. However, its enhanced persuasive power then pushed the ("hard"-)Brexit proponents to an "all-or-nothing" outcome of the conflict narrative, which negatively affected its persuasive force. In conclusion, we propose that the study of persuasive communication needs to weigh (apparent) rhetorical success against the argumentative (and political) commitments incurred.

2. Theoretical background and methodology

The debate about a British withdrawal from the EU, which had gained momentum since the 2010 national elections that brought the (even then partly Eurosceptic) Conservative Party back to power after 14 years of Labour government, reached its first climax in the June 2016 referendum, which was won by a narrow majority of 51.9% of votes in favour of leaving the EU. It is still ongoing at the time of writing (autumn 2019) and has become a focus for analyses of political persuasion due to the high degree of polemical and populist argumentation (Clarke et al. 2017; Buckledee 2018; Diamond et al. 2018; Koller et al. 2019).

The role of metaphors in the debate has been recognised as central in advocating specific lines of argumentation about the UK–EU relationship, as well as in the evaluations and action plans for the withdrawal (Dallison 2017; Đurović & Silaški 2018; Charteris-Black 2019; Musolff 2019; Wenzl 2019). To capture the socio-pragmatic function of metaphor and figurative language use in general we combine cognitive and discourse-historical methods. In Cognitive Semantics, metaphors such as those of the NATION AS A HOUSE, BODY or PERSON, or of INTERNATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AS A MARRIAGE or as FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS, integrate new, abstract, and/or problematic concepts into "frames" of familiar knowledge and experience. These frames imply or suggest specific conclusions and evaluations as "normal" and "standard", which can be revealed by critical framing analysis (Lakoff & Wehling 2016). In addition, the discourse-historical approach (DHA) in-

tegrates linguistic, social and historical methods, so as to arrive at an in-depth "triangulation" of language use in its current social and in its historical contexts (Wodak 2001). When applied to metaphors, the combination of Cognitive Semantics and DHA allows us to follow their diachronic trajectories of their semantic and pragmatic import in relation to the socio-political context (Musolff 2013).

This integrated Cognitive and Discourse-Historical approach also needs to be applied to combinations of discursive devices that have a significant impact on public debate. A striking example of an "impactful" blend of several persuasive devices was the following statement by the then Foreign Secretary in the Conservative government under Theresa May, Boris Johnson, in 2016:

(2) Johnson […] insisted we will get immigration controls back as well as continuing open trade with the EU. Mr Johnson told The SUN: "Our policy is having our cake and eating it. We are Pro-secco but by no means anti-pasto". (*The Sun*, 30 September 2016)

Johnson here reversed the traditional proverbial saying *You can't have the cake and eat it*, which metaphorically implies a critical assessment that someone is or has been trying to achieve an impossible task (*Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* 2001: 189; *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2002, vol. 1: 1206; Wilkinson 2008: 47; Ayto 2010: 53; Speake 2015: 147–148). By replacing the negation with an assertion, Johnson emphatically claimed that the new government in which he was an important cabinet minister would achieve that task, i.e. complete Britain's withdrawal from the EU. In an attempt to add a touch of humour, he also supplied a pun on his own statement by associating its two-sided "open-ness" ('pro', not 'anti') with Italian culinary products.

Whilst the innovative application of the proverb and the pun exemplified Johnson's well-known rhetorical proficiency, the statement also had a clear political message. Johnson promised on the one hand to control immigration into the UK, which ran counter to the EU's "freedom of movement" principle, and on the other hand to secure "open trade" for UK businesses, i.e. to keep the advantages of the EU's "freedom of trade". As these two "freedom" principles are considered to be interdependent (Zapettini 2019), ditching one while keeping the other as part of Brexit is as paradoxical as the proverbial impossibility of eating the cake and having (= keeping) it. The new proverb version thus matched perfectly the intended target message but of course its paradoxical quality made it also a hyperbolic utterance, because it "express[ed] an exceptional or even extreme version of reality" (Kalkhoven & de Landtsheer 2016: 186). For the supporters of Johnson, the statement was thus likely to appear as an optimistic prediction that the new government

of which he was a leading member would overturn the EU rules and get "the best of both worlds" (Ayto 2010: 389).

Between Johnson's innovative use of the proverb in 2016 and the "Brexit cake" comment in example (1) lie three years. At first sight they only seem to have in common the term cake. In Johnson's quotation – example (2) – it appears as part of an idiomatic, proverbial multi-word unit, whereas in the 2019 comment as a free-standing concept that is extended into the metaphorical scenario of an imploding dough.[1] In order to understand (1) as an allusion to (2), we therefore need to demonstrate the continuity of usage of formulations involving cake and pertaining to the Brexit-topic between 2016 and 2019 and explain their contextual pragmatic effects.

To this end, we built a research corpus of 197 press texts comprising 136,280 words and spanning the period 2016–2019. This database is part of a larger research corpus of figurative language use in British and German debates about European Union politics, EUROMETA (Musolff 2016: 14–15). The sample of press media that include the cake-phrase ranges across a wide political spectrum in Britain; it is drawn from print and online versions of *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Financial Times*, *Marxism Today*, *New Statesman*, *Reuters*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian/The Observer*, *The Independent*, *The National*, *The New European*, *The Scotsman*, *The Spectator*, *The Street*, *The Sun*, *The Times/Sunday Times*, *and The Yorkshire Post*. The sample is broadly balanced in terms of Brexit-political leanings (around 65 articles for each of the pro-Brexit, anti-Brexit and indecisive/neutral media) but not statistically validated and only claims to show the range of semantic variation, not a complete representation of all uses.

3. Results: *Having your cake* and losing the plot: the adventures of an innovative proverb application

As outlined above, the following analyses are mainly qualitative and aim to provide a discourse-historical account of the development of the *have/eat cake* proverb formulation and its hyperbolic framing in the Brexit debate. As a rough indication, Table 1 below gives an overview of absolute frequencies of the 197 documented texts in the corpus that contain the *have/eat cake* formulation or an allusion to it. It

[1] "Metaphorical scenario" is used here in the sense of an extended source frame which - in addition to schematic conceptual structure – has narrative, evaluative and argumentative structure that allows for pragmatic implicatures to be drawn (Musolff 2006; 2016: 30–31; Semino 2008: 219–222).

gives an impression of the emergence of the phrase in the run-up to the Brexit referendum 2016 up to summer 2019. It must be borne in mind that these figures were not checked against a general corpus or statistically validated, but they give at least an indicative impression of a "Bell Curve"-like slow increase from a low base in early 2016 to a peak of usage in the period summer 2017-spring 2018 and a decrease to a low base by summer 2019.

Table 1. Corpus tokens of *have/eat cake* phrase

	Jan-March	April-June	July-Sept	Oct-Dec	*Totals*
2019	14	6	1		*21*
2018	49	7	15	14	*85*
2017	4	15	30	12	*61*
2016	2	3	1	24	*30*

Expressing as it does a well-known common-sense piece of wisdom,[2] the *have/eat cake* proverb was applied to British EU-policy topics before Boris Johnson introduced it in the Brexit debate. However, its pre-Brexit usage followed exclusively the canonical version, in which it serves to portray specific policies and actions that are doomed to fail because the actors try to achieve contradictory goals. Thus, in a book chapter on "Sharpening Contradictions" in UK–EU relations, published in 1996, the author critically observed that the "inability to see the limits of the 'having your cake and eating it' approach [that was characteristic for M. Thatcher's government] was also characteristic of the other British governments [since Thatcher's]" (Hill 1996: 76). And as late as October 2015, i.e. at a time when the Brexit topic was already firmly on the agenda, the *Financial Times* quoted a banker from the City of London who predicted that the British government would "not going to be able to have [their] cake and eat it" because in the event of a British withdrawal the UK "would be [in] a situation where we would have to pay to have access but won't have influence over the rules, and they would end up being worse rules" (*Financial Times*, 1 October 2015). In both cases, the *have/eat cake* phrase is used as a metaphor to depict and criticise a futile endeavour (on the part of UK governments) to gain maximum benefits without any cost (in negotiations with the EU).

[2] W. Mieder (1993: 52) counts it among the core group of proverbs in modern Anglo-American English.

Johnson's asserted version, as quoted in (2), which he used already in the months before the June 2016 referendum,[3] turned this critical application of the proverb on its head by promising to achieve the (near-)impossible with Brexit, i.e. keeping the advantages of EU-membership for the UK while getting rid of its commitments. As argued above, such an assertion, i.e. the proposition that it would be possible "to have/keep the cake whilst eating it", is strictly speaking paradoxical, because it is by definition impossible to eat up a cake and still keep it as a whole. On a more lenient interpretation, it could be said to be a highly optimistic, hyperbolic promise to achieve a stunning success with Brexit.

Whilst pro-Brexit media such as *The Sun* celebrated Johnson's optimism, his critics, predictably, attempted to highlight its paradoxical formulation in the asserted have/eat cake phrase as proof of the implausibility of such a policy and tried to turn the proverb in its standard version against him:

(3) No, Boris thinks he can have his Brexit cake and eat it, that [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel […] will say, "just kidding, here's the deal I know you really want". It is cloud cuckoo land […]. (*The Guardian*, 22 February 2016)

(4) The hard task will be telling Britons who voted to Leave that the free having and eating of cake is not an option. (*The Economist*, 25 June 2016)

(5) [EU Council president] Tusk criticised "the proponents of the cake philosophy" who argued the UK could be part of the EU single market without bearing any of the costs. "That was pure illusion, that one can have the EU cake and eat it too. To all who believe in it, I propose a simple experiment. Buy a cake, eat it, and see if it is still there on the plate." (*The Guardian*, 14 October 2016)

Given the counter-argumentation as exemplified in (3–5) and its reliance on the *have/eat cake* proverb's standard common-sense wisdom, one might have expected Johnson's jokey assertion of the impossible to fade quickly from public notice. Instead, the proverb in its asserted form rose to even greater prominence as a quasi-official Brexit slogan in November 2016, when an aide to the Conservative party's working group for the preparation of the negotiations with the EU, was photographed carrying notes into Prime Minister Theresa May's office at 10 Downing Street, which contained the statement:

[3] See e.g. *The Observer* 7 February 2016; for the "prehistory" of Johnson's use of the *have/eat cake* proverb see Musolff 2019: 210–211.

(6) 'What's the model? *Have cake and eat it*'. *(Daily Mirror*, 29 November 2016)

Having been kept in suspense about the government's Brexit negotiation strategy with the tautological reassurance "Brexit means Brexit" (BBC 2016), the British press pounced on the revelation, quoting and showing the photo of the "eye-opening line" (*Daily Star*, 29 November 2016). Commentators invested much speculation and interpretation on it, sometimes with contradictory evaluations even within one and the same newspaper. The (generally pro-Brexit) *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, published on the same day one comment that dismissed the note as "meaningless business jargon" and another one that aligned with the maximalist claim implicit in the asserted version, and asked rhetorically, "Why shouldn't we try to have our Brexit cake and eat it too?" (29 November 2016).

Over the following months, the *have/eat cake* phrase mainly served to articulate divisions within the Conservative government on whether Brexit-negotiations should follow a "maximum gain" strategy, as envisaged by Johnson or would involve at least some cost to the British economy and the UK's international standing. The less Brexit-enthusiastic Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philipp Hammond, tried to warn against over-confidence in the negotiations using the matching, independently established idiom of "cherry-picking" (i.e. choosing only the best bits from something that is on offer, see *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2002, 1: 390) by insisting, "we can't cherry pick, we can't have our cake and eat it" but was immediately rebuffed by an ally of Johnson who mocked him: "Hammond may decide to change his mind by next week on cake anyway" (*Daily Express*, 30 March 2017). Johnson continued to have the backing of the Prime Minister, who was also reported as "still telling Britons they can have their cake and eat it" by "promising barrier-free access to the single market [for British exporters] while stopping EU migrants" (*The Economist*, 1 April 2017). Thus, even if it was not uncontested, Johnson's version of the proverb was still agenda setting in early April 2017.

However, after a national election in June 2017, which deprived them of an outright majority in parliament, and with the experience of the harder-than-expected negotiations with the EU, the government's reliance on the persuasive power of the *have/eat cake* phrase began to weaken. Several newspapers reported that May was recognizing the unfeasibility of retaining all the benefits of EU membership without incurring any losses, which motivated headlines such as "Britain drops 'have cake and eat it' strategy" (*The Independent*, 2 July 2017) or "cake off the menu as hard choices loom" (*The Guardian*, 4 July 2017). The asserted version of the proverb was increasingly linked to a "hard" Brexit position that would sever most eco-

nomic ties with the EU and incur substantial economic risks, which caused alarm among economic experts (*Financial Times*, 23 June 2017: "Hard or soft Brexit? The six scenarios for Britain"). The Chancellor Hammond renewed his earlier critique of *cake*-talk as something to be "discouraged" (*Daily Mail*, 27 June 2017) and the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, mocked the certainty that Brexit would be "a gentle stroll smooth path to a land of cake and consumption" (*Daily Mail*, 20 June 2017).

But if Carney and Hammond had intended to bury Johnson's slogan by mocking it, they had not reckoned with the official opposition, i.e. the Labour-party under Jeremy Corbyn adopting it in a belated attempt to join in the maximalist Brexit rhetoric. Rebecca Long-Bailey, Labour's shadow business secretary and close ally of Corbyn, now claimed it for her party (and even for most of the UK parliament) in a BBC interview:

(7) [Long-Bailey:] "We want to have our cake and eat it, as do most parties in Westminster" (*The Guardian*, 16 July 2017).

When asked by the incredulous BBC interviewer whether this stance did not put her in the same position as that of Conservative Brexiteers, she tried to get out of the self-inflicted conundrum by asserting: "We need to be flexible. We've got to not cut our nose off to spite our face" (*The Guardian*, 16 July 2017). This second answer was at the very least a *non sequitur*, if not a self-contradiction, as the *cut nose/spite face* idiom can be paraphrased as "disadvantage[ing] yourself in the course of trying to disadvantage another" (Ayto 2010: 244), which is almost the exact opposite of the "maximum benefit" implication of the *have/eat cake* proverb.

Her statement was predictably ridiculed and seized upon as revealing a thinly veiled pro-Brexit stance of the Labour leadership. The other main opposition party's spokesman, the Liberal Democrats' MP Tom Brake, commented that Labour's Brexit position was "so indistinguishable from the Conservatives that they have started parroting Boris Johnson" (*The Independent*, 16 July 2017), and the magazine *The Spectator* portrayed Long-Bailey ironically as "channel[ing] her inner Boris Johnson" (*The Spectator*, 16 July 2017). Following the interview, the *cake*-phrase became again highly prominent, but now as the focus for Labour-internal disputes. When in the late autumn of 2017, their Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, suggested that, if returned to power, Labour would abide by the referendum result but still ensure tariff-free access to the single market and the customs union, he was accused repeatedly by the former Labour Prime Minister and Brexit-opponent Tony Blair of caving in to the Tories' "having cake and eating it" strategy (*The Guardian*, 27 November 2017; *The New European*, 11 December 2017; *The*

Daily Telegraph, 4 January 2018).

Subsequently, the *have/eat cake*-phrase served to characterise any Brexit-related stance. Apart from Labour's struggles, the government's position was reported as oscillating between "dropping" the "cake-and-eat-it approach to Brexit" (*The Guardian*, 26 September 2017) and renewed "cakeism" (*The New European*, 15 September 2017; *The Guardian*, 10 January 2018). On the right wing of the Conservatives, which increasingly distanced themselves from May's negotiations, the *have/eat cake* phrase was revived as a pro-(hard)Brexit rallying cry not just by Jonson but also by the influential backbencher Jacob Rees-Mogg who claimed it as a Thatcher-legacy (*The National*, 10 July 2017).

By spring 2018, the phrase was not only reaching its peak in frequency (see Table 1) but also became the (usually implicit) reference point for ever more inventive allusions and extensions of the source-theme of FOOD CONSUMPTION as Brexit metaphors. Sir Martin Donnelly, a former high civil servant warned the government that leaving the European customs union would be "like giving up a three-course meal in favour of a packet of crisps", whereas the then Conservative MP and Brexit-critic, Anna Soubry, attacked Corbyn for "offering 'a skinny Brexit'" (in analogy to a "skinny [coffee] latte" (*The Guardian*, 27 February 2018). *The Independent* ridiculed the plans of the Conservatives' parliamentary ally, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland, announced by their leader Arlene Foster, as a "chimpanzee's tea party Brexit" where there was "cake everywhere. It's been had, it's been eaten, it's been smeared up walls. It's had pots of hot tea smashed over the top of it. It's been scooped on to the end of long hairy fingers and violently jammed into ears" (*The Independent*, 8 March 2018) and one Labour MP, Alison McGovern, went out of her way to denounce Brexit, using the s-four letter word, as "the s*** cherry on the s*** icing on the s*** cake that the Tories baked us all in the 1980s" (*Daily Express*, 3 March 2018).

This accumulation of dysphemistic and hyperbolic parodies on the *cake/food*-themed metaphors for Brexit in early 2018, which could easily be extended, is indicative of the climax of rhetorical exploitations of the *have/eat cake* phrase. It came to an abrupt end after March 2018: not only did the absolute numbers of uses and allusions fall sharply from the all-time peak in February 2018 (22 occurrences) to at most 4 occurrences per month on average after that, but the asserted uses of the proverb disappeared altogether after March 2018.[4] Following the further trail of

[4] The last recorded asserted allusion was made by Ian Duncan Smith, a former Tory Party leader and ardent pro-Brexit proponent, who asked Theresa May to remind her negotiation partners that "cake exist[ed] to be eaten and cherries exist to be picked" (*The Times,* 5 March 2018). Even this

Johnson's 2016 statement (example 2) in the corpus from then up to September 2019, we find just eight explicit quotations across pro- and anti-Brexit media, all of which are subject to critical evaluations or ridicule. The majority of *cake*-related references to Brexit in that period, do not, however, quote the full proverb application but allude to it, all of them, again in a critical perspective.

After three years of repeated uses, quotations, party-political re-affiliations and parody, Johnson's proverb-reversal seems to have run its course. From an emphatic, if humorous, assertion of Brexit-optimism, it has developed into a quotation with a default negative evaluation and the further implicature – for those who remember Johnson's authorship – that his initial optimism was foolhardy. Such implicatures are owed to the hindsight of three years of public debate and changing public opinion. From a linguistic perspective, it seems significant that the *have/eat cake* phrase's development from one end of persuasive instrumentalisation (endorsement of a hard Brexit) to the other (warning against Brexit) suggests a close relationship between it and a hyperbolic 'all-or-nothing' argumentation, as indicated earlier. The following section will discuss this relationship in detail.

4. Brexit and hyperbole

The hyperbolic presentation of Brexit – as either a "once in a lifetime" chance for Britain to maximize its political and economic clout at the expense of the European Union,[5] or as a catastrophic mistake that could destroy the wealth and democratic fabric of the nation – did of course not start with Boris Johnson's 2016 promise. In this section we present evidence that the Brexit debate was characterised from the start by statements in the superlatives and exaggerating predictions that announced extreme outcomes. Johnson's proverb use fitted extremely well into this context and may be said to have epitomised it. Here are a few headlines from before the Brexit referendum, which illustrate the feverish anti-EU/pro-UK rhetoric of the "Brexiteers" as well as their "Remainer" opponents' attempts to denounce and refute it:

(8) The European Union […] is doomed to fail, sooner or later, with catastrophic consequences for our part of the world, and the only way forward is for one major country to break ranks and show that there can be a better

use, however, is ambiguous as it leaves open whether Duncan Smith had understood the "maximum benefit" implication of the proverb.

[5] See *The Daily Telegraph,* 21 February 2016: "Boris Johnson backs Brexit as he hails 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity' to vote to leave EU".

alternative consistent with Europe's core enlightenment values. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 9 March 2016)

(9) Boris Johnson: The EU wants a superstate, just as Hitler did. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 14 May 2016)

(10) JUST four days from now we can set Britain free. Free from the stranglehold of the EU superstate which […] has grown into a monster engulfing our democracy. […] Unless we vote Leave […], all of this will get much worse (*The Sun*, 19 June 2016)

vs.

(11) Britain would not survive a vote for the Brexit (*Financial Times*, 25 June 2015)

(12) Without [EU-led] cooperation in Europe, the roof will soon cave in (*The Guardian*, 17 May 2016)

(13) The NHS [National Health Service][6] would be as safe as a pet hamster in the presence of hungry python if Boris Johnson […] rose to power following Brexit, Sir John Major [former Conservative Prime Minster and Brexit-opponent] has said. (*The Observer*, 5 June 2016).

Since the referendum on 23 June 2016, figurative praise and condemnation of Brexit have continued unabated, though their target has shifted in terms of the hoped-for or feared end result (i.e., "soft", "hard, "no deal", "revoked"/cancelled Brexit) and in terms of the party-political rallying-function of slogans such as the cake-phrase. Initially, hyperbolic Brexit-praise was repeated time and again by Conservative politicians who supported Brexit and were in charge of preparing it in government, i.e., besides Boris Johnson as Foreign Secretary, the International Trade Secretary Liam Fox and the Brexit Secretary David Davis. Fox painted a rosy picture of the UK's economy breaking free from the restraints of the EU bureaucracy: "Britain is going to be open for business like never before. We will […] become the world's brightest beacon and champion of open trade" (*Daily Express*, 26 September 2016) and Davis ultra-optimistically announced that the "negotiating cards" with the EU were "incredibly stacked our [= Britain's] way" (*The Guardian*, 12 October 2016).

[6] The Leave Campaign had promised to give the 350 million Pound that the UK allegedly paid weekly in the EU budget to the NHS (see *The Guardian,* 10 June 2016: "Why Vote Leave's £350m weekly EU cost claim is wrong").

However, one year into the negotiations, Davis seems to have realized the complexities of the deal and acknowledged, again via hyperbole, that they made "the NASA moonshot look simple" (*The Guardian*, 18 July 2017). By the time that Prime Minister Theresa May presented the outcome of her negotiations with the EU to the British Parliament, Davis and Johnson had both resigned from the cabinet because they disagreed with her deal. Many of their Tory colleagues were opposed to it as well, which motivated them to defeat their own government's proposals together with the opposition in several parliamentary votes between January and March 2019. The rejection was couched in the starkest terms possible, with hyperbolic condemnation from the left to the far right:

(14) May's Brexit deal is the worst of all worlds, Labour's Corbyn says (*Reuters*, 22 November 2018)

(15) This is a calamitous, cowardly Brexit deal - and we're now being shafted for it by the EU (B. Johnson, *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 November 2018)

(16) 'Game, set, match!' Farage[7], congratulates EU for Brexit deal – 'Worst in history! [for Britain]' (*Daily Express*, 29 November 2018)

While May's government remained in office over the another six months, it continued to be castigated on account of its alleged defeatism, or as "one of the most protoplasmic displays of invertebracy since the Precambrian epoch" (Boris Johnson in *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 March 2019) and a "plan to enslave us in the customs union" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 2019). *The Daily Express* recycled opposition leader Corbyn's "worst of all worlds" Treaty verdict to condemn the further Brexit postponement (*Daily Express*, 11 April 2019), which became necessary when the Treaty was not endorsed by parliament for the third time. After May's subsequent resignation, the new Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, quickly tried to launch another promise of Brexit success that sounded even more fantastic than his *have/eat cake* phrase. He invoked a US Comic Strip hero:

[7] Farage, a long-time campaigner for Brexit, was leader (and MEP) for the pro-Brexit "UK Independence Party" to the right of the Conservatives, which never won a seat in the Westminster Parliament. Due to party-internal fights Farage left UKIP and founded a new "Brexit Party" in 2019, which managed to win the European Parliament elections in May 2019. Since then he has tried to form a "no deal Brexit"-coalition with the Conservatives under B. Johnson. His "congratulations" to the EU in November 2018 are a case of hyperbolic sarcasm: the "Game, set and match" allusion refers to the commentators summarizing the end-point of a victorious tennis match, when the last ball was the one that decided the last game in the last set and thus decided the match. This absolute "praise" for the EU implies an equally absolute condemnation of the alleged defeat suffered by May's government, as made clear by the conclusion "Worst in history".

(17) 'Britain will break free of its 'manacles' from the EU like the Incredible Hulk' (*Daily Mail*, 15 September 2019).

The Richter scale for metaphorical hyperbole is open-ended, so the Brexit debate may yet provide even more extreme examples. By comparison with Johnson's later Brexit-rhetoric, even his 2016 use of the *have/eat cake* phrase may seem relatively moderate and focused on achieving persuasion by a bold, if implausible promise, rather than fantasy. However, an evaluative comparison of hyperbolic statements within a discourse formation such as the Brexit debate remains speculative. Once the exclusive or predominant use of superlatives and exaggerating predictions and assessments have become the rhetorical background for public discourse, hyperbole seems to become a "must" for the participants in the debate and develops its own dynamics of ever more "escalating" contributions. The discourse-historical development from *having your cake and eating it* to *breaking free like the Incredible Hulk* is not a linear one but rather evidences the continuing need to produce ever-new attention-grabbing scenarios that will be taken up quickly by the public.

5. Conclusions

The examples cited in the previous section have shown that the Brexit debate was from the start characterised by a strong tendency of hyperbolic rhetoric, due to the pro-Brexit side depicting the political choice as a matter of complete victory (liberation from the EU) or utter defeat (continued and irreversible enslavement). This extreme argumentation pattern seems to have been at least reinforced, if not caused, by D. Cameron's decision to conduct and formulate a highly polarising referendum (Demata 2019). Within this highly charged public debate, the discourse-historical development of the *have/eat cake* phrase exemplifies the transformation of Brexit from a foreign policy option (among other options) into an all-or-nothing, triumph-or-catastrophe dichotomy. It was first used to advertise Brexit as a perfect "win-win" opportunity, only to end in ignominious defeats in parliament and a humiliating request for postponement. Even if Brexit is finally consummated it will not be the super-victory promised in Johnson's defiant proverb assertion. This "sub-optimal" result was "achieved", I contend, through the combination of metaphor and hyperbole, as the catalyst of discursive conflict escalation.

In order to generate sufficient public support in favour of Brexit during the referendum campaign, its main proponents saw fit to paint a picture of extreme opposites: here a strong, determined UK, ready to break free and lead, as the "brightest beacon" of open trade, other countries, with the negotiating cards "stacked" in its favour, certain of its triumph over a "doomed" EU that would have to concede all

of the UK's demands. The outcome was bound to be the best of both worlds, i.e. continuing to enjoy all existing EU benefits but getting rid of its faults and shortcomings. Johnson's *eating and having one's cake* announcement summarised this scenario, which resembled the plot of a fairy tale. The inherent problem of this hyperbolic scenario was that if any of its superlative evaluations ("brightest beacon", "cards incredibly stacked in our way") turned out to be unrealistic, the only remaining opposite scenario would be one of a desperately weak UK vs. an almighty EU, which would lead to the former's "worst possible", "calamitous", or "cowardly" capitulation, i.e. the equivalent of *neither eating nor keeping any cake*.

This second scenario was the one predicted by Brexit opponents from the start, and it was effectively confirmed by the pro-hard Brexit side by late 2018/early 2019 through their assessment of May's treaty, with Johnson and Farage holding up the hope that a "no deal Brexit" (i.e. the UK's withdrawal from the EU without any treaty) would still deliver at least part of the hoped-for benefits of leaving the EU.[8]

Johnson's initial reversal of the *having and eating cake*-proverb thus carried with it an inherently hyperbolic narrative. During the run-up to the referendum and in its aftermath, it was highly persuasive. It inspired the sympathisers in the right-wing tabloids such as the *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* etc. to enthusiastically endorse it time and again and it also served as a rallying cry for the Brexiteers among the Conservatives as well across other parties. The discourse-historical evidence shows that this persuasiveness lasted as long as there were still hopes of the EU giving in to the central UK's demands (i.e. continued participation in and enjoyment of shared economic benefits but independence from common migration rules and judicial commitments). Once the details of May's negotiated treaty became clear by late spring 2018, i.e. that both sides of the "win-win"-scenario could not be achieved together, *having the cake and eating it* became useless as a pro-Brexit promise and mainly survived as a mocking reminder of the initial pro-Brexit optimism.

Counterfactually, we may speculate that if the Brexit-proponents had instead used a more guarded, moderate goal (e.g. a "soft Brexit", referring to continued

[8] See e.g. Johnson in *The Daily Telegraph,* 15 April 2019: "[…] some day soon we are going to get out. So don't despair. Don't give up. It is going to happen, and at that wonderful moment it will be as though the lights have come on at some raucous party"; Farage, cited in the *Daily Express*, 16 January 2019: "I promise you, if [the British people] get pushed too far it's a lion that will roar. "We will be even more defiant if we have to fight a second referendum and we will win it by a bigger majority."

membership in the EU's customs union or even the internal market), May's 2018 deal, or some variant of it, could have been declared a "victory" in its own right, in the sense of a great achievement for the government, considering the complex negotiation conditions. Instead, due to the hyperbolic promises attached to the "win-win" scenario: *cake to eat and keep*, *beacon*-function for the world, *cards stacked in Britain's favour*, etc., any outcome "below" the super-victory was bound to be evaluated as a super-defeat. It was not just a setback or disappointment but a catastrophic capitulation. The initial gain in persuasiveness that the combination of hyperbole and metaphorical proverb had yielded in the early phases of the Brexit debate was thus "paid for" later by a matching loss of argumentative plausibility once the presupposition of a feasible "super-victory" had disappeared. At the time of writing, B. Johnson's government seems inclined to "up the ante" by becoming even more hyperbolic and by "escalating" metaphors to fantasy figures such as the *Incredible Hulk*. It remains to be seen whether this further communicative gamble can convince the British public that Johnson's Brexit, presumably with a "no deal" outcome, comes close enough to fulfilling the earlier promises.

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MOŽE LI POLITIČKA RETORIKA BITI „PREUVJERLJIVA" ? KOMBINACIJA POSLOVICE I HIPERBOLE U SLUČAJU ENGLESKE POSLOVICE *HAVE THE CAKE AND EAT IT*

Može li upotreba jezičnih sredstava, poput metafore, ironije i hiperbole, u svrhu uvjeravanja, biti „preuvjerljiva", tj. može li pro(e)mašiti svoj retorički cilj? Odnosno, može li se kombinacijom takvih sredstava ipak pretjerati te tako govornike (i sklone čitatelje) obvezati na djelovanja koja nisu bila zamišljena kao ishod uvjeravanja? U ovom se radu istražuju semantičke i pragmatične promjene u primjeni metaforičke engleske poslovice *You cannot have your cake and eat it* u kontekstu Brexita u britanskom javnom diskursu u razdoblju od 2016. do 2019. Na početku tog razdoblja tadašnji ministar vanjskih poslova Boris Johnson i drugi zagovornici Brexita modificiraju tu poslovicu u tvrdnju „We can have our cake and eat it", koja utjelovljuje jasnu potporu Brexitu i njegovim navodnim koristima za Veliku

Britaniju; čak je jedno vrijeme odredila smjer u kojem se kretala percepcija javnosti o pregovorima između UK-a i EU-a. S vremenom je postala predmet pretjerane hvale s jedne strane, te poruge s druge strane, a u posljednje je vrijeme, kako se čini, izgubila znatan dio svoje uvjerljivosti. U radu se tvrdi da je Johnsonova modifikacija poslovice u početku uspješno oživjela njezino metaforično značenje i uokvirila ju u hiperboličkom retoričkom kontekstu, ali da je isto tako zagovornike Brexita usmjerila na očekivanje ishoda „sve ili ništa“ kako u odnosu na narativ sukoba o EU-u tako i u odnosu na narativ unutarnje britanske političke rasprave. Prema tome, retorički uspjeh može nametnuti argumentativne (i političke) obveze koje govornik možda nije predvidio i koje mogu biti u suprotnosti s njegovim željenim ishodom uvjeravanja.

Ključne riječi: argumentacija; diskurs; hiperbola; metafora; uvjeravanje; poslovica.