



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2018.2.95-101>

**MCDSARE: 2018**  
**International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the**  
**Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education**

**METAPHORICAL INCOHERENCE OR WHAT**  
**MAY'S LETTER MAY MEAN**

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***Abstract***

The image we create about the surrounding reality is utterly subjective and that it is deeply and undoubtedly culturally dependant. There is a huge difference between the ‘real’ reality and our own version of it and this difference is generated by the multitude of filters that come into play when we process the ever growing amount of information that is constantly sent our way. The paper aims at analysing the potential metaphorical incoherence of the letter sent by Theresa May, the Prime Minister of the UK, to Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. By means of specific analytical tools belonging to cognitive linguistics, we prove that not only the deep structure of the letter does not support the apparent message but it contradicts it significantly. The lexical inventory selected by the author of the text, such as the use of personal and possessive, along with the source domains used to conceptualise the target domains of ‘UK’, ‘EU’, or ‘negotiations’ clearly display a different perspective upon the relationship between the two protagonists of the UK’s withdrawal from the union than the one suggested by the obsessive phrase ‘a deep and special partnership’.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor; mapping; metaphorical (in)coherence; decoding;

**1. INTRODUCTION**

There has never been a more challenging time in human history that the present when it comes to analysing language as a cultural tool and/or phenomenon. Along with the never-ending usefulness of the Internet and social media, came also the unprecedented size of audience that a message can reach. A satisfactorily educated individual of the 21st century with a smart phone and a decent Internet connection could have a far greater impact in terms of number of people that get his/her message than Leonardo Da Vinci or Isaac Newton could have had when they were alive. Once we realise the endless manipulative potential of language from this perspective, the analysis of this aspect becomes exhilarating and frightening at the same time.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

It is common knowledge that the image we create about the surrounding reality is utterly subjective and that it is deeply and undoubtedly culturally dependant. There is a huge difference between the 'real' reality and our own version of it and this difference is generated by the multitude of filters that come into play when we process the ever growing amount of information that is constantly sent our way. The same chunk of information might have numerous different interpretations according to each individual's family background, level of education, political partisanship, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, ethnic origin, wealth, age and/or gender (the list could go on). If we add to these the intentionality of the message and the possibly hidden agenda of the author, one would agree with the idea that such an analysis is not only worth doing but it is almost mandatory.

As we previously explained (Velică, 2005), there is no real communication involved in the mass media (especially in the case of the news) as there is no real dialogue, no real sharing of ideas, no constructive feedback but only one-way feeding of pre-digested chunks of information that justifies one point of view or another or serves one interest of other. The same intention of placing a certain thought in the mind of the reader should be assumed in the case of political communication as well. There is no novelty in the perception that mass media are no longer free and independent and that, most often than not, they have in fact become instruments of opinion making, of political conversion or, to put it bluntly, of control and manipulation. Perhaps one of the best known voices supporting this idea is that of Avram Noam Chomsky's; the intimate relationship between meaning, power and language has been brilliantly dissected and explained in many of his books and studies (see Chomsky, 1988, 1989, 2001, 2002 and 2016). What we hope to be different in our paper is the fact that we approached the text under scrutiny from a combined Chomsky-Lakoff perspective, heavily lying on the cognitive metaphor's revealing power when understanding the meaning(s) of a message.

## 3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper comes as a continuation of an older interest of ours that we have in the matter of how language contributes to the way we are mapping our reality and how learning to decode some of its basic mechanisms might help us avoid being too easily manipulated. Our aim here is to place under the linguistic microscope the official letter triggering Article 50 that Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, wrote to Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, a year after the vote, in order to decide whether she really means what she says in there.

Without trying to blow things out of proportions, we claim that this letter might prove to be as important as other famous official or personal documents that marked the British history such as King John's Magna Carta or Winston Churchill's Memoirs of the Second World War. Consequently, due to their significance, they should be analysed, explored and commented upon from as many perspectives as possible.

## 4. RESEARCH METHODS

As already mentioned, our research was heavily based on G. Lakoff's theory of cognitive metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) as we believe that if one manages to deliver a linguistically well-camouflaged message on a conscious level, it is not as easy to accomplish this on a deep-structure level where cognitive patterns function automatically according to psychological and biological givens. As Lakoff and Sebeok stated, we are physically conditioned to conceptualise the world from an erectile posture and to manipulate ideas with our hands, thus, operating with metal concepts as we would with real 3D objects.

We analysed the letter looking for cognitive patterns used to refer to the two major parties involved into this issue: the UK and the EU; we looked carefully at the use and connotations of the personal pronouns 'I', 'you' and 'we', the possessive adjectives 'my', 'our' and 'your' as well as the cognitive metaphors referring to the 'UK'/'United Kingdom' and the 'EU'/'European Union'. More precisely, we firstly identified all the instances of the pronoun 'we' and established which referred to the British people/Parliament and which referred to the two parties involved in the process; then, we applied

the same statistical method to the possessive 'our' identifying the instances when it pointed only at the British people and those when it referred to both sides of the partnership; thirdly, we focused on the cognitive patterns associated to the two political entities involved: the UK and the EU. Both of them were conceptualised as either ENTITIES/PEOPLE/ACTORS or OBJECTS/PLACES/CONTAINERS but in different proportions.

Further on, we looked at the types of cognitive patterns employed by the authors of this text: were they mainly ORIENTATIONAL, ONTOLOGICAL or STRUCTURAL? As the second conceptualise events, states, activities, emotions, ideas etc. as entities (persons) and substances; objects, containers and the third explain one complex concept in terms of another whose meaning is easier to grasp, the more complex the concepts you operate with, the more structural metaphors you will use.

Finally, we tried to establish the cognitive truth value of the almost obsessively used phrase 'deep and special partnership' employed seven times in a 5-page document. The fundamental question that we asked ourselves was: 'Did the author of this letter actually mean a fully equal and mutually beneficial relationship as this phrase might suggest?'

## **5. FINDINGS**

At the end of our research, we identified 66 instances of the personal pronoun 'we', 32 instances of the possessive adjective 'our', 15 instances of 'I/my' and only 3 instances of 'you/your', 38 mentions of the UK and 34 of the EU. Table 01 is showing these data and the corresponding percentages and rates.

Table 02 summarises the source domains used by the author of this text to metaphorically conceptualise the target domains of 'UK' and 'EU'; to put it differently, the author chose, consciously or not, to refer to these two entities, the UK and the EU, as either HUMAN or NONHUMAN by means of ontological metaphors. This table also shows that vast majority of the total 50 conceptual metaphorical patterns were either ONTOLOGICAL or ORIENTATIONAL whilst only 1 was STRUCTURAL which is quite significant in the context of our analysis.

It is worth remembering here that this letter is an official statement, issued by the Prime Minister of the UK on the behalf of the British Government that displays two primary functions: (i) to inform the EU officials that the UK, after the vote taken the previous year, decided to leave the European Union by invoking the famous Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty which gives any member state the right to withdraw from the union and (ii) to clearly and firmly express the British Government's intention to have 'a deep and special partnership' with the EU. Well, the surface structure of the letter, the lexical choices and the tone of the letter seems to fully abide by the two functions above mentioned. However, if one goes deeper, towards the deep structure of the text, looking at the cognitive fabric of it, one will be surprised to discover that actually the letter might be saying something else about the way the author of this letter conceptualises the idea of partnership, the relations between the UK and the EU, the power balance between these two entities and ultimately the degree of importance assigned to them.

The phrase 'a deep and special partnership' appears 7 times in a 6-page letter; this frequency is a clear indicator of the fact that the Prime Minister really wants a strong partnership with the EU, based on equality and mutual trust. If we add to this the two formulas, 'Dear President Tusk' and 'Yours sincerely', that start and, respectively, end the letter which are in Theresa May's handwriting, we could easily agree that the willingness for an equal partnership is fair and genuine. Nonetheless, cognitive linguistics would disagree with this conclusion and we shall try to explain why. The first definition of the term 'partnership' suggested after a simple online search, explains the term as follows:

*'A relationship between individuals or groups that is characterised by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal.'*

(American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language)

By any standards, an equal partnership should mean a 50% – 50% distribution of responsibilities and benefits, as the definition stipulates. The almost obsessively repeated 'deep and special partnership' does not enjoy the backup of the author's lexical choices as the personal pronoun 'we' is used twice as much with reference to the UK as it is used with reference to the UK&EU; furthermore, the possessive 'our' displays an opposite distribution as it is used almost two times more with reference to the UK&EU as it

is with reference to the UK only. In other words, ‘we’ (the UK and the EU) are partners but ‘we’ (the UK) are more important than ‘you’ (the EU); moreover, ‘our’ (the UK and the EU) responsibilities and things to do are equally great and difficult to achieve but ‘our’ (the UK) load in this endeavour is almost half of ‘yours’ (the EU). Theresa May is militating for equality and fairness but she makes direct personal reference to herself by using the personal pronoun ‘I’ five times more than she refers to her *equal partners to be* (‘you/your’). One more argument that could be added here is the higher frequency that the term ‘UK/United Kingdom’ in comparison with ‘EU/European Union’: 52.78% and, respectively, 47.22% (ironically enough, this ratio is almost a perfect mirror image of the vote percentages obtained in June 2016).

Table 01. Frequency of identifiers

| <b>we<br/>(UK)</b> | <b>we<br/>(UK&amp;EU)</b> | <b>our<br/>(UK)</b> | <b>our<br/>(UK&amp;EU)</b> | <b>I/my</b>                 | <b>you/your<br/>(EU)</b>    | <b>UK</b> | <b>EU</b>  |
|--------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 44                 | 22                        | 12                  | 21                         | 15                          | 3                           | 38        | 34         |
| 66.67%             | 33.33%                    | 37.5%               | 62.5%                      | 5 times<br>more<br>numerous | 5 times<br>less<br>numerous | 52.78%    | 47.22<br>% |

The cognitive unbalance is also to be found in the case of the metaphorical concepts used by the author of the letter when conceptualising the two protagonists of the alleged ‘deep and special partnership’. Thus, the UK is conceptualised, by means of cognitive patters such as COUNTRIES ARE ENTITIE/PEOPLE/ACTORS, as HUMAN in 63.15% of the cases whilst the EU is perceived as HUMAN in only 47% of the cases. If we add to this the fact that in the majority of cases, the source domain used in the ontological metaphors to explain the target concept of EU is that of OBJECT, PLACE or CONTAINER, one could agree that there might be a deliberate attempt of dehumanizing the EU in the eyes of the reader while putting the UK across as a knight in a shining armour which, as N. Chomsky (1997) plainly said, is one of the basic contemporary manipulation techniques.

Table 02. Ways of conceptualising

| <b>UK</b>    |                 | <b>EU</b>    |                 | <b>COGNITIVE PATTERNS</b>             |                   |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>HUMAN</b> | <b>NONHUMAN</b> | <b>HUMAN</b> | <b>NONHUMAN</b> | <b>ONTOLOGICAL/<br/>ORIENTATIONAL</b> | <b>STRUCTURAL</b> |
| 24           | 14              | 16           | 18              | 49                                    | 1                 |
| 63.15%       | 36.85%          | 47%          | 53%             | 98%                                   | 2%                |

Besides synthesising the findings above mentioned, Table 02 brings something else into the limelight: the only STRUCTURAL metaphor (the most complex type of cognitive metaphors which is used to explain a too intricate concept by a more easily graspable one) used by Theresa May is when she expresses her concerns about the rights of the people, suggesting that ‘we should aim to strike an early agreement.’ The cognitive pattern her is NEGOTIATION IS WAR which speaks volumes about the cabinet’s intention of approaching the ‘deep and special partnership’ mentioned more than 1 time/page. In other words, the only concept that, in the author’s perspective was worthy of a STRUCTURAL metaphor was not that of *equality, partnership, people’s rights*, etc. but that of *negotiation*, and even so, not in the friendliest terms.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Our conclusion, after applying a cognitive linguistic analysis to the text of the letter sent by Theresa May to the President of the European Council is that there is a significant metaphorical incoherence between what the apparent message claims, i.e. the UK is working towards a ‘deep and special partnership’ with the EU, and what the conceptual patterns present in the deep structure of the text

suggest about the British officials' perception of this 'partnership'. In other words, the Prime Minister comes to the table of negotiations carrying the flag of equality and shared responsibility but her mind set seems to be one of superiority and utter lack of consideration for the other side. As is the case with any politically important document and/or message, everything is about how reality is perceived and in the organisation of such texts nothing is random. The way we shape our reality is most often than not heavily influenced by texts like the one under scrutiny here; therefore, understanding the potential *hidden* meanings of such a text is of paramount importance (Velicã, 2006).

#### **Annex 1**

On 23 June last year, the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. As I have said before, that decision was no rejection of the values we share as fellow Europeans. Nor was it an attempt to do harm to the European Union or any of the remaining member states. On the contrary, the United Kingdom wants the European Union to succeed and prosper. Instead, the referendum was a vote to restore, as we see it, our national self-determination. We are leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe – and we want to remain committed partners and allies to our friends across the continent.

Earlier this month, the United Kingdom Parliament confirmed the result of the referendum by voting with clear and convincing majorities in both of its Houses for the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill. The Bill was passed by Parliament on 13 March and it received Royal Assent from Her Majesty The Queen and became an Act of Parliament on 16 March.

Today, therefore, I am writing to give effect to the democratic decision of the people of the United Kingdom. I hereby notify the European Council in accordance with Article 50(2) of the Treaty on European Union of the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the European Union. In addition, in accordance with the same Article 50(2) as applied by Article 106a of the Treaty Establishing the European Atomic Energy Community, I hereby notify the European Council of the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the European Atomic Energy Community. References in this letter to the European Union should therefore be taken to include a reference to the European Atomic Energy Community.

This letter sets out the approach of Her Majesty's Government to the discussions we will have about the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union and about the deep and special partnership we hope to enjoy – as your closest friend and neighbour – with the European Union once we leave. We believe that these objectives are in the interests not only of the United Kingdom but of the European Union and the wider world too.

It is in the best interests of both the United Kingdom and the European Union that we should use the forthcoming process to deliver these objectives in a fair and orderly manner, and with as little disruption as possible on each side. We want to make sure that Europe remains strong and prosperous and is capable of projecting its values, leading in the world, and defending itself from security threats. We want the United Kingdom, through a new deep and special partnership with a strong European Union, to play its full part in achieving these goals. We therefore believe it is necessary to agree the terms of our future partnership alongside those of our withdrawal from the European Union.

The Government wants to approach our discussions with ambition, giving citizens and businesses in the United Kingdom and the European Union – and indeed from third countries

around the world – as much certainty as possible, as early as possible.

I would like to propose some principles that may help to shape our coming discussions, but before I do so, I should update you on the process we will be undertaking at home, in the United Kingdom.

#### **The process in the United Kingdom**

As I have announced already, the Government will bring forward legislation that will repeal the Act of Parliament – the European Communities Act 1972 – that gives effect to EU law in our country. This legislation will, wherever practical and appropriate, in effect convert the body of existing European Union law (the "acquis") into UK law. This means there will be certainty for UK citizens and for anybody from the European Union who does business in the United Kingdom. The Government will consult on how we design and implement this legislation, and we will publish a White Paper tomorrow. We also intend to bring forward several other pieces of legislation that address specific issues relating to our departure from the European Union, also with a view to ensuring continuity and certainty, in particular for businesses. We will of course continue to fulfil our responsibilities as a member state while we remain a member of the European Union, and the legislation we propose will not come into effect until we leave.

From the start and throughout the discussions, we will negotiate as one United Kingdom, taking due account of the specific interests of every nation and region of the UK as we do so. When it comes to the return of powers back to the United Kingdom, we will consult fully on which powers should reside in Westminster and which should be devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. But it is the expectation of the Government that the outcome of this process will be a significant increase in the decision-making power of each devolved administration.

#### **Negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union**

The United Kingdom wants to agree with the European Union a deep and special partnership that takes in both economic and security cooperation. To achieve this, we believe it is necessary to agree the terms of our future partnership alongside those of our withdrawal from the EU.

If, however, we leave the European Union without an agreement the default position is that we would have to trade on World Trade Organisation terms. In security terms a failure to reach agreement would mean our cooperation in the fight against crime and terrorism would be weakened. In this kind of scenario, both the United Kingdom and the European Union would of course cope with the change, but it is not the outcome that either side should seek. We must therefore work hard to avoid that outcome.

It is for these reasons that we want to be able to agree a deep and special partnership, taking in both economic and security cooperation, but it is also because we want to play our part in making sure that Europe remains strong and prosperous and

able to lead in the world, projecting its values and defending itself from security threats. And we want the United Kingdom to play its full part in realising that vision for our continent.

**Proposed principles for our discussions**

Looking ahead to the discussions which we will soon begin, I would like to suggest some principles that we might agree to help make sure that the process is as smooth and successful as possible.

**i. We should engage with one another constructively and respectfully, in a spirit of sincere cooperation**

Since I became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom I have listened carefully to you, to my fellow EU Heads of Government and the Presidents of the European Commission and Parliament. That is why the United Kingdom does not seek membership of the single market: we understand and respect your position that the four freedoms of the single market are indivisible and there can be no “cherry picking”. We also understand that there will be consequences for the UK of leaving the EU: we know that we will lose influence over the rules that affect the European economy. We also know that UK companies will, as they trade within the EU, have to align with rules agreed by institutions of which we are no longer a part – just as UK companies do in other overseas markets.

**ii. We should always put our citizens first**

There is obvious complexity in the discussions we are about to undertake, but we should remember that at the heart of our talks are the interests of all our citizens. There are, for example, many citizens of the remaining member states living in the United Kingdom, and UK citizens living elsewhere in the European Union, and we should aim to strike an early agreement about their rights.

**iii. We should work towards securing a comprehensive agreement**

We want to agree a deep and special partnership between the UK and the EU, taking in both economic and security cooperation. We will need to discuss how we determine a fair settlement of the UK’s rights and obligations as a departing member state, in accordance with the law and in the spirit of the United Kingdom’s continuing partnership with the EU. But we believe it is necessary to agree the terms of our future partnership alongside those of our withdrawal from the EU.

**iv. We should work together to minimise disruption and give as much certainty as possible**

Investors, businesses and citizens in both the UK and across the remaining 27 member states – and those from third countries around the world – want to be able to plan. In order to avoid any cliff-edge as we move from our current relationship to our future partnership, people and businesses in both the UK and the EU would benefit from implementation periods to adjust in a smooth and orderly way to new arrangements. It would help both sides to minimise unnecessary disruption if we agree this principle early in the process.

**v. In particular, we must pay attention to the UK’s unique relationship with the Republic of Ireland and the importance of the peace process in Northern Ireland**

The Republic of Ireland is the only EU member state with a land border with the United Kingdom. We want to avoid a return to a hard border between our two countries, to be able to maintain the Common Travel Area between us, and to make sure that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU does not harm the Republic of Ireland. We also have an important responsibility to make sure that nothing is done to jeopardise the peace

process in Northern Ireland, and to continue to uphold the Belfast Agreement.

**vi. We should begin technical talks on detailed policy areas as soon as possible, but we should prioritise the biggest challenges**

Agreeing a high-level approach to the issues arising from our withdrawal will of course be an early priority. But we also propose a bold and ambitious Free Trade Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. This should be of greater scope and ambition than any such agreement before it so that it covers sectors crucial to our linked economies such as financial services and network industries. This will require detailed technical talks, but as the UK is an existing EU member state, both sides have regulatory frameworks and standards that already match. We should therefore prioritise how we manage the evolution of our regulatory frameworks to maintain a fair and open trading environment, and how we resolve disputes. On the scope of the partnership between us – on both economic and security matters – my officials will put forward detailed proposals for deep, broad and dynamic cooperation.

**vii. We should continue to work together to advance and protect our shared European values**

Perhaps now more than ever, the world needs the liberal, democratic values of Europe. We want to play our part to ensure that Europe remains strong and prosperous and able to lead in the world, projecting its values and defending itself from security threats.

**The task before us**

As I have said, the Government of the United Kingdom wants to agree a deep and special partnership between the UK and the EU, taking in both economic and security cooperation. At a time when the growth of global trade is slowing and there are signs that protectionist instincts are on the rise in many parts of the world, Europe has a responsibility to stand up for free trade in the interest of all our citizens. Likewise, Europe’s security is more fragile today than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Weakening our cooperation for the prosperity and protection of our citizens would be a costly mistake. The United Kingdom’s objectives for our future partnership remain those set out in my Lancaster House speech of 17 January and the subsequent White Paper published on 2 February.

We recognise that it will be a challenge to reach such a comprehensive agreement within the two-year period set out for withdrawal discussions in the Treaty. But we believe it is necessary to agree the terms of our future partnership alongside those of our withdrawal from the EU. We start from a unique position in these discussions – close regulatory alignment, trust in one another’s institutions, and a spirit of cooperation stretching back decades. It is for these reasons, and because the future partnership between the UK and the EU is of such importance to both sides, that I am sure it can be agreed in the time period set out by the Treaty.

The task before us is momentous but it should not be beyond us. After all, the institutions and the leaders of the European Union have succeeded in bringing together a continent blighted by war into a union of peaceful nations, and supported the transition of dictatorships to democracy. Together, I know we are capable of reaching an agreement about the UK’s rights and obligations as a departing member state, while establishing a deep and special partnership that contributes towards the prosperity, security and global power of our continent.

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