How (not?) to quote a proverb: the role of figurative quotations and allusions in political discourse

Abstract

Can a proverb be quoted against itself? Since its introduction into the British "Brexit" debate in early 2016, the proverbial notion of "having one's cake and eat it" has had its meaning temporarily turned upside down from exposing the absurdity of wishing to consume and still retain the same goods or privileges, to serve as a reassuring promise (i.e., that in withdrawing from the EU, the UK could hold on to all or most of the membership benefits whilst shedding its obligations, which would equal 'having one's cake and eating it').

Using a corpus of 180+ British media texts containing varying applications of the proverb, this article charts its pragmatic development 2016-19 and discusses the conditions of its change from an ironical condemnation into a reassuring promise (and back). We identify a metaphorical scenario with strongly implicated evaluations as a necessary condition for the interpretability of the proverb's metarepresentations and analyse the emergence of competing scenario versions with reference to an iteration of ironical metarepresentations, which leads to a 'layering' of metarepresentations. In conclusion, we propose to include discourse-historical knowledge in the notion of metarepresentation.

Keywords:

Discourse history, irony, metaphor, metarepresentation, quotation, proverb, scenario

1. Introduction: Proverbs and metarepresentation

Uttering a proverb is a special case of "metarepresentation" – the proverb as the utterance's content is not the whole message to be communicated; rather, its *application* to a particular situation is being used to indicate the speaker's attitude to some aspect of that situation. From their relevance-theoretical perspective, Sperber and Wilson (1995) view the use of a proverb as a case of "echoic utterance":

> An echoic utterance need not interpret a precisely attributable thought: it may echo the thought of a certain type of person, or of people in general. Suppose you tell me to hurry up and I reply as follows:
>
> *More haste, less speed.*
>
> This utterance is a literal interpretation of a traditional piece of wisdom which achieves relevance by making manifest that I find this piece of wisdom indeed wise in the circumstances. Clearly, however, what makes traditional wisdom traditional is that it is attributable not to any specific source but to people in general. (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 238-239)

Even though it is not attributable to a specific speaker or speech event, the proverb has a 'precedent' because both speaker and hearer know it as an established (piece of) 'wisdom' in their community. What matters for its understanding is that a *resemblance* relationship holds between the traditional proverb formulation (a first order representation) and its higher-order representation (or metarepresentation) as applied to the current context. This resemblance concerns both the semantic properties and the linguistic form (Wilson 2000: 426). As regards the latter, *More haste, less speed,* presents a special case. Due to the semantic change of the lexical item *speed* from meaning 'success' to 'rapid progress', this proverb, which dates from the fourteenth century (Ayto 2010: 166; Speake 2015: 146-147), seems an almost paradoxical formulation in present-day English if it is misunderstood in terms of compositional semantics.

Instead, it has to be learnt and applied as a fixed or frozen expression, with a lexically obscure structure. In terms of content-related or *interpretive resemblance,* this metarepresentation, like that of other proverbs, depends on a match between its traditional meaning and the current situation. *More haste, less speed* only makes sense if its implicit argument that "you make better progress with a task if you don't try to do it too quickly" (Ayto 2010: 166), can be applied in a meaningful way to the situation at hand, e.g. as a piece of friendly warning to someone who is trying to work too fast, or, as a sarcastic comment on a bad result of (over-) hasty work. In both these contexts, the speaker expresses a critical stance towards someone's impatience in finishing a task by applying the general proverbial truth to it. In both cases, an ironical reading is possible: it is obvious in the case of the sarcastic verdict but it may also be found in the warning-comment, e.g. if it is given when the work is still in progress but the danger of over-hastiness is becoming apparent. So, what is the relationship between proverb-application and irony?

This article analyses a proverb application in public political discourse that became notorious for its multiple ironical re-contextualisation, i.e. applications of the saying, *You can't have your cake and eat it, too* in the public debate about the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union ("Brexit"). For roughly three years, parts of the debate were dominated by non-canonical use of a proverb (*We can have our cake and eat it!*), which was subjected to ironical and critical comments as well as new source-attributions and reinterpretations. They provide a wealth of naturally occurring data on proverb metarepresentation and interpretation that reveal which impliactures of its application in politicians' utterances were taken up by the receivers (journalists/public in general) and then further alluded to. On the basis of 185 press texts from that period, which amount to a over 126.000 words,[1] the following sections give an overview over the range of variation in these proverb applications and attempt to elucidate the conditions for the interpretability of their inferences, especially the ironical ones, by applying theorems of metarepresentation and figurative scenarios.

2. "Having your cake and eating it": political ambition attempting to disprove proverbial wisdom

In 2009, when he was Mayor of London, the British Conservative politician Boris Johnson gave an interview in which he described his already then expansive political ambitions as follows:

> (1) My policy on cake is still pro having it and pro eating it. (*The Daily Telegraph,* 10/04/2009).

Johnson's answer was a humorous allusion to the metaphorical proverb "You cannot have your cake and eat it (too)". Like "Less haste, more speed", this proverb has a long history of usage dating back to the mid-16th century (Ayto 2010: 53; *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* 2001: 189, Mieder 1993: 52; Speake 2015: 147-148; Wilkinson 2008: 47), and it, too, contains a lexical item that has changed its meaning over time. The verb *have* in the proverb has the now archaic meaning of 'holding' or 'keeping possession' (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2002, vol. 1: 1206), which is of course incompatible with to any action of *eating, spending* or *consuming* the same object. This contradiction is reflected in the proverb's standard meaning explanation, "You cannot consume or spend something, and still keep possession of it" (Speake 2015: 147). Applying the proverb metaphorically to an action implies its negative, critical evaluation. For instance, the headline of a *Daily Telegraph* article, "The whining rich can't have their cake and eat it" denounced as hypocritical the attitude of those who "monopolise wealth in the 21st Century [and still] moan about taxes" (*The Daily Telegraph,* 11/08/2014).

In line with this explication, Johnson's statement of his preference for 'having his cake and eating it' in (1) can be interpreted as a (mildly) self-ironical characterisation of his political

ambitions as being unrealistic. Its inclusion in a 2009 *Daily Telegraph* article by A. Gimson was, however, by no means intended to make Johnson look ridiculous in the eyes of its readers. It appeared in a newspaper, for which Johnson himself had been writing regularly since the mid-1990s,[2] and his journalist colleague Gimson affectionately depicted him as "a Merry England Tory" (*The Daily Telegraph,* 10/04/2009). Gimson quoted the *have/eat cake* statement to show Johnson as a politician who, by making fun of his own ambitions without denying them, was more honest and at the same time more rhetorically astute than other politicians. Quoting his unconventional application of the proverb was intended to prove his ambition to 'achieve the impossible', without literally claiming that he could fulfil it. Seven years later Johnson used his favourite proverb version again. By this time, he had become Foreign Secretary in a Conservative government under Theresa May, which had emerged after the 2016 Brexit-referendum that produced a majority in favour of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union:

> (2) 'We'll have our cake and eat it'. BORIS Johnson has declared his support for a hard Brexit […]. He also 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,* 30/09/2016)

The pun on Italian culinary products in the last quoted sentence underlined Johnson's effort to appear witty and not too serious in the interview, but his disclaiming stance did not extend to his ability to deliver the impossible. Rather, he emphatically asserted such an ability and named two specific policy objectives that he wanted to achieve in earnest, i.e. "immigration controls" and "open trade". As part of the EU's "internal market" system, free movement of people and open trade are interdependent; so Johnson's aim of keeping freedom of trade for

the UK whilst ditching freedom of movement was, according to EU rules, a contradiction – as such, it matched the paradoxical aim of 'eating and keeping' a cake and could have been a joke, like the 2009 usage. However, announcing it as an official policy of a government, in which Johnson was a senior cabinet member, was unlikely to be a joke. Instead, it was intended as a reassuring promise, which claimed, in flamboyant language, that the British government would in fact be able to achieve the equivalent of keeping the proverbial cake and consuming it.

Pragmatically, this usage constitutes a highly specialised case of metarepresentation in that it not only quotes or applies the proverb (which, as argued above, constitutes a standard case of metarepresentation) but does so in a non-canonical or counter-canonical way. Instead of negating the possibility of *having one's cake and eating it*, it (re-)asserts that possibility, thus implicating a conclusion that runs counter to the standard interpretation.- Whilst the canonical version of the proverb is based on the default 'impossibility' scenario based on the figurative formulation of an everyday experience as its metaphorical source,[3] Johnson's version was based on a 'possibility' scenario that expressed a belief in the feasibility of both 'consuming and keeping' the benefits of the Brexit-*cake*. In relation to everyday experience, it of course lacks any experiential basis and thus must count as a non-serious, counterfactual or at least hyperbolic formulation.

Johnson's Brexit-application of the proverb could have remained a one-off statement but instead it gained huge popularity and became one of the most quoted and commented-on phrases in British public debate during 2016-2019 (author 2019, Dallison 2017, Goodwin 2017). As we have seen (example 1) it had been Johnson's personal trademark phrase since 2009 and its 'updated' Brexit-application became a focus of attention for both friend and foe after he had joined the Brexit referendum campaign on the side of "Leave" with a prominent article in the *Daily Telegraph* (21/02/2016). The next day after its publication, the *Guardian's*

editor Michael White re-recycled the proverb in its canonical form to denounce Johnson's stance as wishful thinking:

> (3) […] Boris thinks he can have his Brexit cake and eat it, that Angela Merkel [German Federal Chancellor] will say, "just kidding, here's the deal I know you really want". It is cloud cuckoo land in a Europe which is slipping dangerously close to fragmentation as opportunistic rascals less charming than Boris copy his example. (*The Guardian,* 22/02/2016)

Despite this and other put-downs, Johnson's saying became a catchphrase, especially in the aftermath of the referendum on 23 June 2016, which had yielded a narrow majority in favour of "Brexit". Whilst Johnson and his fellow "Brexiteers" [= supporters of Brexit] revelled in the hope to "take back control" of Britain's sovereignty from the EU without paying a high political and/or economic price, anti-Brexit voices reiterated White's warnings:

> (4) […] if the Brexiteers were to be proved right in their blithe promises that Britain can have all the economic advantages of EU membership with none of the disadvantages […] then their French, Dutch and Danish counterparts will surely cry: "I want what they are having." After all, who would not like to have their cake and eat it? (*The Guardian,* 25/06/2016)

> (5) 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*, 25/06/2016)

By October 2016, with the preparations for the UK government's negotiations with the EU under way, the EU Council president, Donald Tusk, among other EU leaders, [4] picked up on Johnson's *have/eat cake* statement, only to ironically debunk it:

(6) Without naming Johnson, notorious in Brussels for his jokey phrase that Britain could have its cake and eat it, 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*, 14/10/2016)

Although there was thus no shortage of opposing voices both nationally and internationally, the *have/eat cake* phrase continued to gain even more prominence and became a 'buzzword' in November 2016 when Julia Dockerill, an aide to the Conservative party vice chairman Mark Field, was photographed carrying notes into the Prime Minister's Office at 10 Downing Street that indicated the government's Brexit preparations in Johnson's terms:

(7) 'What's the model? Have cake and eat it'. (*Daily Mirror*, 29/11/2016)

Ignoring the attempts by government spokespersons to downplay the notes as "not reflect[ing] Downing Street conversations" (*The Guardian*, 29/11/2016), the press across the political spectrum pounced on the quotation as being a give-away. The *Daily Telegraph* denounced its (non-)originality: "The UK wants to 'have its cake and eat it.' Brilliant! I'm surprised nobody thought of this before" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 29/11/2016) and the *Sunday Times* concluded that the revelation had undermined the May's "attempts to give 'no running

commentary'" (*The Sunday Times,* 29/11/2016). In the Brexit-critical papers, disapproval was more outspoken and deriding. The *Daily Mirror* saw in the photo "That Tory 'have cake and it' Brexit strategy explained in all its humiliating glory" (*Daily Mirror,* 29/11/2016), whilst the *Guardian* cited the Scottish nationalist politician and Brexit-opponent S. Gethin, who sarcastically denounced the 'have and eat' plan by paraphrasing it with the idiom "to cut off [one's] nose to spite [one's] face" (*The Guardian,* 29/11/2016).[5]

By late 2016, the *have/eat cake* phrase was firmly established as expressing the Brexiteers' position, so that its party-political index function – as a proudly asserted slogan for their side and as a sarcastic (dis-)qualification levelled against them by their opponents – seemed unchangeable. The main remaining uncertainty was about its target references. One type of interpretations concentrated on the government's contradictory goals of limiting immigration but retaining access to the benefits of the EU's single market (*The Sun,* 30/09/2016; *Daily Mirror,* 29/11/2016). Other commentators claimed that there was an option of the UK negotiating new trade deals with individual countries while it was still an EU-member state (*The Guardian,* 29/11/2016; *The Daily Telegraph,* 29/11/2016). A third group focused on the objective of Britain freeing itself from the jurisdiction of the European courts while remaining a part of the "European Economic Area" (Goodwin 2017). In each of these cases the specific combination of policies was precluded under the current EU treaty provisions.

This uncertainty over the precise reference of the metaphorical ingredients of the Brexit-*cake* remained even after the UK government formally notified the EU about its intent to withdraw in March 2017 and national elections took place in June of that year, which returned a Conservative government under May, albeit without a parliamentary majority. Shortly after beginning its new term of office, however, several newspapers reported that the Conservatives were now recognizing the non-feasibility of retaining the benefits of EU membership without incurring any costs or obligations. This news motivated headline puns such as "Cake off the menu" or "'Cake and eat it' Brexit turns stale" (*The Guardian,* 04/07/2017 and 03/07/2017). A

New Statesman article parodied Johnson's Anglo-Italian wordplay (see example 2) and mockingly begged:

> (8) Stop it, Boris! This recycling is pasta joke. If you carry on, Liam Fox [= Trade minister] will want a pizza the action. Or you'll be moved to the Minestrone of Defence. [*Please, please stop – Ed.*] (*New Statesman*, 06/04/2017).

Journalists were joined in such allusive punning by the only minimally Brexit-enthusiastic Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond. After having already questioned Johnson's policy statements on several occasions before (Hunt 2017; *The Guardian,* 29/03/2017), he gave a speech in Germany in June 2017, in which he first quoted the German economist L. Erhard with the saying that "compromise is the art of dividing a cake in a such a way that everyone believes he has the biggest piece", as a platform to launch an elaborate counter-argument to Johnson's trademark phrase without mentioning its author:

> (9) [Hammond commented on Erhard's simile:] 'Wise words with some applicability to the Brexit negotiations although I try to discourage talk of cake amongst my colleagues.' Pursuing the analogy, he urged Germans to work with Britain to get the best possible Brexit deal that 'protects jobs, business, and prosperity' so that 'we can maximise the size of the cake and each enjoy a bigger piece'. (*Daily Mail,* 27/06/2017)

Hammond's ironical *cake*-allusion was interpreted in the British press varyingly as a "dig" or "swipe" at Boris Johnson and as setting out an alternative "soft Brexit vision" (*Daily Mail,* 27/06/2017, *The Independent,* 27/06/2017). The Chancellor of the Exchequer may indeed have intended to bury Johnson's catchphrase by contrasting it with Erhard's "wise words". If so, he

had probably not reckoned with some leading members of the oppositional Labour Party starting just then to articulate their "soft" Brexit-option (as opposed to the "hard Brexit" favoured by Johnson et al.) by means of reviving the *have/eat cake* phrase. In mid-June 2017, the Labour peer Lord Andrew Adonis depicted the horror-vision of a "hard Brexit", which in his view had to be prevented:

(10)   [Adonis said:] 'If we can't have our cake and eat it then we face a

serious relative decline in our living standards compared with France and

Germany and I don't believe the British people will put up with that. So we

would, in that event, I believe, face a crisis.' (*The Independent,* 14/07/2017)

Following Adonis's line of thought, it could be argued that vis-à-vis the 'bad' alternative of decline and crisis (as a result of a "hard" Brexit), the 'good' alternative – to be pursued by Labour – would be a "soft" Brexit solution that would still allow the nation to 'have its cake and eat it' by remaining as close as possible to pre-Brexit status. Two days later, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Labour's shadow business secretary, endorsed this position in a BBC interview:

(11)   We want to have our cake and eat it, as do most parties in Westminster.

[…] We need to be flexible. We've got to not cut our nose off to spite our face.

(*The Observer,* 16/07/2017)

Long-Bailey's idiom choices of *have/eat cake* and *cut off nose/spite face* come close to a self-contradiction (compare Gethin's comment which used the same *cake-* and *nose*-idioms as opposites, cited above). They were seized upon as revealing Labour's confused or duplicitous stance of on Brexit and found no friends on either side of the Brexit-fence. For opponents of

the UK's withdrawal, the Liberal Democrats' spokesman, Tom Brake, gave the damning

verdict that Labour's Brexit position was,

(12)   […] so indistinguishable from the Conservatives that they have started

parroting Boris Johnson. (*The Independent,* 16/11/2017).

On the other side, the conservative leaning magazine *The Spectator* gleefully portrayed Long-

Baley as "channel[ing] her inner Boris Johnson" and pointed out the contrast between her

current stance and Labour's earlier derision of Johnson, thus making her appear hypocritical:

(13)   […] this is what Boris Johnson once said his position on Brexit was. At

the time, the Foreign Secretary's comments were the subject of mockery from

the opposition… (*The Spectator,* 16/07/2017).

Subsequently, the *have/eat cake* phrase became a battle cry for Labour-internal divisions.

When, for instance, in late autumn of 2017, their Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell,

attempted to square his party's circle on Brexit again by suggesting that, if returned to power,

they would abide by the referendum result but also strive for a renewed UK-EU "negotiated

relationship" to ensure tariff-free access to the single market and the customs union, he was

accused by the former Labour leader Tony Blair and his party allies of caving in to the Tories'

"having cake and eating it" stance (*The Daily Telegraph,* 04/01/2018, *The Guardian,*

27/11/2017, *The Economist*, 10/01/2019, *The New European,* 11/12/2017, *The Independent,*

04/01/2018).

Apart from its use in Labour's party-internal struggles, the *have/eat cake* phrase continued to

be employed both to ridicule (as impossible) and endorse (as legitimate) the Conservative

government's negotiation goals (*The Guardian,* 26/09/2017, *The Scotsman,* 27/092017), with

critics coining the pejorative neologism "cakeism" (*The New European*, 15/09/2017; *The Guardian,* 29/11/2017; 10/01/2018) which, by adding the *ism*-suffix, likened the Brexit strategy to an ideological doctrine (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2002, vol. 1: 1430). Even more explicitly critical compound coining was also cited as coming from outside. In early 2018 Prime Minster May's plans for a "bespoke Brexit deal" earned her a sardonic comment from a German government official who was quoted deriding the idea as,

(14)   […] "the latest episode in the cake and eat it sitcom series". (*Daily Express,* 10/01/2018).

In a similar vein, the *Financial Times* quoted an EU official who criticized the UK proposals as

(15)   "Cake, more cake and buckets of cherries. Nothing concrete on how leaving the customs union and single market would attain the goals she [PM Theresa May] wants" (*Financial Times,* 03/03/2018).[6]

Here the "author"-role (Goffman 1981: 144) appears to have shifted from Johnson or other British pro-Brexit politicians to EU-officials: if readers did not know that it was Johnson who first made the *have/eat cake* promise, they might assume that the phrase originated with the EU. Strongly Eurosceptic media indeed tried to allocate not just the phrase but its maximalist stance to the EU; the *Sun,* for instance, alleged that it was the "EU [who wanted] to have their cake and eat", because their negotiator, M. Barnier, wanted to have "all his demands met in exchange for us to stay shackled to Brussels" (*The Sun,* 21/11/2017). The *Daily Express,* too, complained that the "EU want[ed] to have its cake and eat it", referring to alleged EU plans to reach quickly an agreement on trade tariffs but delay one on financial services (*Daily Express,* 03/04/2017). In both cases, the *have/eat cake* phrase was reinterpreted as characterizing an

alleged EU intention of unfairly getting maximum benefits. These articles, which appeared in newspapers that had supported Johnson's non-canonical *have/eat cake* promise, thus reverted to its canonical version criticising 'having the cake and eating it' while shifting the authorship and political responsibility for its non-canonical assertion to the EU.

Given the high degree of contentiousness of the *have/eat cake* phrase and its susceptibility to being reallocated to any speaker the respective quoters/commentators wanted to criticise, it is hardly surprising that in the latter phase of the debate, since mid-2018, some media found it important to remind their readers explicitly of where the phrase originated:

> (16)   Time was when deluded Brexiters peddled the fantasy that a deal would be a piece of cherry-topped cake. (*The Observer,* 21/10/2018)

> (17)   "cakeism" […] derives from the breezy pre-referendum statement of Boris Johnson, the pro-Leave former foreign secretary, that, with regard to cake, he was "pro having it and pro eating it". As the Brexit talks progressed, EU negotiators used the word "cake" to describe British attempts to keep the benefits of EU membership after Brexit, but avoid the obligations. (*Financial Times,* 03/12/2018)

These texts signal a historical distance ("Time was …"; "breezy pre-referendum statement …") to Johnson's *have/eat cake* phrase and metarepresent both its notorious 'maximum-benefit' implicature and their own critical stance towards it and/or its proponents ("fantasy", "deluded"). In other cases, the historical trajectory is also highlighted but not explained or clearly evaluated:

(18)   The theme of cake has cropped up throughout the Brexit process, with Brexiteer and former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson accused of "cakeism" for saying the UK should "have our cake and eat it" as we leave the European Union. (*Daily Express,* 24/11/2018).

The occurrence of discourse-historical reminders such as those in examples (16) - (18) reveals a degree of uncertainty among journalists about whether their audiences still remembered the argumentative gist of the non-canonical proverb version with regard to Brexit, after all the re-phrasing and re-commenting had left open if 'having a cake and eating it' was a good thing or not. There is even evidence of some politicians and journalists getting confused or ignoring Johnson's template. The former Conservative party leader and pro-(hard) Brexit MP, Iain Duncan Smith, for instance, was quoted as exhorting Theresa May during her negotiations with the EU to,

(19)   "remind them that cake exists to be eaten and cherries exist to be picked" (*The Times,* 05/03/2018).

It is plausible to assume that Duncan Smith was at least partly aware of *cake-* and *cherry-*related idioms' histories the Brexit-debate but he missed the point that they signaled the UK's intention to gain *extraordinary* or maximum benefits from Brexit. The normality of 'literal' cake-eating and cherry-picking, which the former Tory leader appears to refer to, has got nothing to do with the special ambition expressed by Johnson's version of the *have/eat cake* phrase. As a result, Duncan Smith even received ironical comments intimating he was too naïve to understand its implicature of special, maximum benefit.[7] Another Brexiteer, the Tory MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, also 're-literalised' his application the proverb by referring to his own

taste for cake, whilst leaving no doubt that he did understand its 'maximum profit' inference and allocated it to the former Tory Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher:

> (20)   '[…] when the Press Association asked him whether the UK will be able to "have its cake and eat it" when it leaves the European Union, [Rees-Mogg] replied: "I like cake, I like eating it, I like having it and I like baking bigger cakes, which was Margaret Thatcher's great saying." (*The National*, 10/07/2017)

At the other end of the political and rhetorical spectrum, the Labour MP Alison McGovern overegged a verbal outburst by denouncing Brexit as,

> (21)   'the s**t cherry on the s**t icing on the s**t cake that the Tories baked us all in the 1980s'. (*Evening Standard,* 06/03/2018)

Like Rees-Mogg, she alleged a continuity of British Conservative hostility towards the EU since Thatcher, albeit from a diametrically opposed political position. Her *cake*-allusion, which elicited strong rebuke from pro-Brexit politicians and media (*Evening Standard,* 06/03/2018; *Daily Express,* 07/03/2018), applied its dysphemistic hyperbole to an alleged long-standing Tory-policy, i.e. not to the Brexit-specific post-2016 application of the *have/eat cake* phrase. Even though the *cherry-, icing-* and *cake*-allusions here are consistent among themselves and are also Brexit-related, they still do not link with Johnson's proverb version (and hence not with its implicature of achieving the impossible).

Another ambiguous case of *cake*-allusion from the latter phase of the Brexit-debate is a quotation by the Brexit-opposing actress Emma Thomson who was quoted criticizing contemporary Britain as

(22)   "[…] a cake-filled misery-laden grey old island" (*Spectator,*
21/01/2019)

Whilst the inclusion of the *cake*-item here may be read as an allusion to the *eat/have cake*

phrase, i.e. as part of a dismissive characterisation of 'Brexit Britain', it might also reference a

general stereotype that has got nothing to do with the Brexit debate at all. In the absence of

additional contextual data for the quotation (which were missing in the article in question) the

choice is undecidable.

The above examples show the wide range of variation in metarepresentations of Brexit-related

version of the *eat/have cake* proverb. In the public debate, these versions co-occur to this day;

however, the distribution of tokens in our sample shows that assertions of the UK's ability to

'have its cake and eat it' along the lines of Johnson's 2016 statement have disappeared since

mid-2018, whereas re-applications of the canonical version (which often include an ironical

metarepresentation of the non-canonical version) continue to be used, albeit in gradually

diminishing numbers. On the other hand, ambiguous examples of allusive *cake*-mentions such

as those in the last fur examples (19) – (22), which include no explicit metarepresentation of

the 'performing the impossible' scenario, are becoming more frequent since 2018. Together,

these indications point to a fading of the once-prominent application of the non-canonical

proverb version to the Brexit-conundrum from the public debate.

3. Discussion

What can we learn from the (relatively short) discourse career of the *have/eat cake* phrase in

the Brexit context? In the first place, it confirms the view that the use of proverbs is a special

case of metarepresentation in that its echoic effects are often ironical – and highly changeable.

While they may include lexical items with archaic meanings (such as *have* for 'keep') that

have been 'frozen' for centuries their pragmatic import can be turned upside down, up to the

point of deriving opposite argumentative conclusions. This seems to be especially the case
with metaphorical proverbs. Categorizing an action as 'having the cake and eating it' always
implies an evaluative analogical conclusion (Gentner and Bowdle 2008) that is derived from
an experientially based metaphorical mapping (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Lakoff 1993). Its
canonical application is a negated utterance ('you/one can't have….'), which expresses a
common-sense assessment of the respective target action as being impossible. Like *More
haste, less speed,* it has a rather obvious sarcastic, emphatically ironical function when uttered
as a comment on an unsatisfactory state of affairs, namely the loss of some hoped-for benefit,
as confirmation of the old wisdom that one consume or enjoy something completely and still
keep possession of it (compare Speake 2015: 147).

Less sarcastically, the asserted form ('X is having/trying to have the cake ….'), functions as
an ironical hint at the impossibility or likely failure of the respective agent succeeding in what
he/she is trying to do. Its ironical implicature is generated by presupposed shared knowledge
of the canonical negated version as being self-evidently true and its contradiction in the
specific context, e.g. negotiations with the EU, impossible. The current speaker "echoes" (in
the relevance-theoretical model) or "pretends" (according to post-Gricean *pretense* theories)[8]
an imagined assertion that the action in question qualifies as a case of *having the cake and
eating it* and juxtaposes this metarepresented illusionary notion with the reality of an obvious
(impending or already accomplished) failure. As a result, the canonical (negated) proverb-
version is confirmed. Together with this confirmation the speaker communicates his/her
disapproval of the action in question to the addressee. In case the addressee is or was the
respective agent of the attempted *eat/have cake* action, the respective utterance is a rather
direct, polemical form of criticism. If a third party is the agent, the addressees are invited to
join the speaker in the critical evaluation. If the agent is the speaker him- or herself, the
utterance is *prima facie* a case of self-criticism/self-irony, as in Johnson's 2009 usage (see

example 1), which may, however, have further weak implicatures aimed at the addressee disagreeing with the criticism (i.e., fishing for compliments).

Compared with this canonical proverb version, Johnson's 2016 assertive application to Brexit marked an innovative rhetorical move. His assertion that Britain ("we") would be able 'to eat and keep its cake' (i.e., at the target level, 'maintain free trade without free movement in its relationship to the EU', see example 2) reversed of the proverb's default implicature, i.e. from an ironical comment to an emphatic promise or reassurance that the British post-referendum government, of which he was a member, would make the (near-)impossible possible, against the expectations of hitherto 'normal' statements on Brexit. His utterance defied the common-sense assumption embodied in the canonical proverb version and challenged its implicature, so that from 2016 onwards, it's the *have/eat cake* phrase could be used to used for competing inferences. In the preceding section we described that as based two scenarios, i.e. a common-sense default one of an unavoidable choice of either eating or having/keeping the cake and the counter-factual (and counter-intuitive) one of the possible combination. Of course, in terms of experiential source domain grounding, the default scenario is the only one possible, but as an audacious exercise in imagining the hitherto unimaginable, the fictitious counter-scenario of both eating and keeping a cake has its own slightly absurdist appeal, which suited Johnson's personal rhetorical style as a quirky, unconventional and unpredictable "Merry England Tory" (see above). Its "scenario" qualities go beyond purely argumentative and narrative aspects, the notion of someone trying to eat and keep a piece of cake comes close to a comedy sketch, e.g. in the Monty Python tradition.

On the downside, Johnson's new proverb application was, of course, vulnerable to ridiculing and sarcastic reinterpretation, i.e. metarepresentation combined with more or less explicit dissociation. This is indeed what happened in 2016/17 (see examples above) and by mid-2017 the public debate in Britain had become saturated with meta-communicative references to Johnson's and other Brexiteers' assertive uses so that these comments (including recycled

quotations of his 2016 statement) formed a second layer of shared knowledge in the public debate. This double layer of implicated conclusions made possible a double 'echoic' effect, which has been exploited in many applications at least since mid- 2017. Speakers could now employ the *eat/have cake* phrase without explicitly quoting Johnson, in the knowledge that both his non-canonical version and its criticism (via the canonical version) were well known. His fantasy scenario of 'having the cake and eating it' thus inspired debunking attempts such as re-literalisation (example 6), further, hyperbolic punning (example 8) or contrasting with other *cake*-related statements (example 9) which, though unrelated to Johnson's proverb use, 'responded' (critically) to his inferences. When Brexit-opposing Labour politicians tried to adopt their adversaries' seemingly unbeatable Brexit-endorsing proverb version (examples 10, 11), they were denounced as self-contradicting, hypocritical or opportunistic on account of their anti-Johnson stance (examples 12, 13).

Further twists in the proverb's discourse career since late 2017 included re-allocations of its authorship to EU officials, the emergence of allusive coinages (*cakeism, fantasy that a deal would be a piece of cherry-topped cake*) and more or less accurate historical reminders how the *have/eat cake* phrase had become prominent in the first place, which side it belonged to and what it had come to signify in the meantime. The 'necessity' for such discourse-historical explanations became evident from ambiguous examples, in which the *cake*-allusion was no longer clearly linked to alternative 'possibility' or 'impossibility' inferences. Instead, it was related to a different source quotation, e.g. by M. Thatcher, and brought in line with other items from the source domains of harvesting and/or consumption (*picking, eating, baking*) (examples 19-21), or as a vague reference to a national stereotype (example 22). In these cases, the inferences of the metarepresentation are weaker than those of Johnson's emphatic non-canonical version and of its equally emphatic allusive refutations. Instead, the speakers in (19)-(22) mainly used aspects of the *have/eat cake* phrase to communicate their own stance

towards Brexit or the UK, without a clear allusion to Johnson's proverb use, its inferences or its counter-arguments.

In terms of meta-representational 'layering', we can identify four main types of applying the proverb 'You can't have your cake and eat it (too)' to Brexit (in addition to its canonical or default version):

i. Johnson's and other Brexiteers' non-canonical proverb application to assert that the UK could 'have the cake and eat it' in its negotiations with the EU, leading to the inference that they could 'achieve the (near-)impossible' goal of both leaving the EU and still enjoying all or most of its benefits;

ii. A 'responding' metarepresentational denunciation of Johnson's or other Brexiteers' assertions from Brexit-opponents who re-iterated the canonical version to underline the certain impossibility of the Brexiteers' goal;

iii. Further (meta-)metarepresentational quotations of and allusions to the proverb as applied to Brexit (i.e. metarepresentations of versions i and ii) with the purpose of ironically referencing a preceding speaker (or group of speakers), e.g. as naïve, over-optimistic etc.;

iv. Reductive allusions that cited the *cake*-lexeme but did not implicate inferences about the 'possibility/impossibility' of achieving Brexit goals.

For all four types of applications we found multiple instantiations in the corpus. The great majority (> 80% of texts in the corpus) involve quoting or other metarepresentations, which can best be explained as a corollary of the text genre, i.e. press discourse, which tends to feed off politicians' statements. The application types existed side by side for an extended period of time, and together they have built a micro-tradition within the Brexit debate to this day, which derives its coherence through intertextual referencing. The high amount of ironical and punning uses within the sample also indicates a humorous, entertaining side effect of the

proverb's application to the Brexit conundrum. Journalists and politicians across all political sides made special efforts in construing new versions in order to increase salience for their particular stance in the debate.

The emergence of such an intertextual echo-system is only possible, of course, on the basis of a recognisable conceptual template, which was provided by the narrative-argumentative scenario expressed in the canonical form of the proverb, which in turn is rooted in everyday experience. In this version, the proverb implies a common-sense insight into the impossibility of combining mutually exclusive benefits. Even Johnson's non-canonical, assertive version implicitly presupposes such a critical default-evaluation of the impossibility-scenario in order to trigger the desired novelty/surprise effect of contradicting it and asserting its opposite inference. Since the launch of this non-canonical version in 2016 and continuing even after the heyday of optimistic predictions about a maximum-benefit outcome had passed (2017/18), the competing *have/eat cake* scenario versions have served as reference points for allusive metarepresentation. This intertextual referencing signals party-political allegiances and helps to show off the speakers' proficiency in positioning themselves and their readers in the "community of practice" (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999) of Brexit-debaters, whose members share discourse-historical background knowledge and compete for innovative allusions.

4. Conclusions

Our overview of the range of applications of the proverb 'You cannot have your cake and eat it' in the Brexit debate has revealed a complex of metarepresented versions; these include asserted and negated versions, explicit confirmations as well as denunciations of their truthfulness/appropriateness, ascriptions to one's own side, the opponents' side or to third parties, and ambiguous allusions that leave open whether a 'possibility' or 'impossibility' conclusion is implicated at all. These cases are in principle all covered by the concept of metarepresentation as outlined by Wilson (2000), which expressly includes "reporting and

echoing" cases that "add an extra layer of metarepresentation to the communicated content, since not only the attribution but also the speaker's attitude must be represented" (Wilson 2000: 432). In the period observed, the iterations of metarepresented versions of the *have/eat cake phrase* were seemingly endless and arguably confused some users (see examples 19, possibly also 20, 21 – if these are 'taken at face value'). Furthermore, following Johnson's high-profile intervention in the Brexit-debate through the application of the non-canonical proverb version in 2016 and its subsequent promotion to 'buzzword' status, the mere mention of parts of the phrase, such as the single lexeme *cake,* in the context of Brexit-related topics sufficed to be understood as an allusion to his and other Brexiteers' ambitions of 'achieving the impossible'. Hence, what was metarepresented was not just the representation of a specific statement but its pragmatic value, complete with an evaluative bias, which then could be commented on further by each new current speaker. As a result, the analysis reveals what appears to be a chain of metarepresentations, e.g. journalist X using the *cake*-allusion commenting on politician Y's stance towards another speaker Z's evaluation of the *have/eat cake* phrase. The high density of usage of the proverb applications in the public debate over a relatively short period of time created a heightened intertextual awareness on the part of the reading audience, so that every new use, even in just minimally allusive form, provided a sufficient, albeit vague, echo of its previous uses.

Whilst it may be possible in principle to list all proverb applications and explicit allusions as a continuous 'chain' of metarepresentations that either explicitly or implicitly 'echo' preceding utterances, it is perhaps more realistic, especially with regard to implicit allusions, to think of the scope of the metarepresentation not just referring to the last specific preceding utterance but to the whole discourse tradition that was constituted by applications of the proverb. From 2017 on, mentioning the *cake*-word enabled readers with sufficient political background knowledge to access the principal 'possibility' or 'impossibility' versions of the *have/eat cake* scenario, without necessarily pinpointing to a specific speaker/author's utterance – as we have

seen, authorship was several times re-claimed and re-allocated across party- and Brexit-political frontiers. Hearers/readers did not need to know *exactly* who had used which proverb version when and where, to be able to follow the 'to-and-fro' of metarepresentations. Once in a while, journalists saw fit to remind their readers of the Johnsonian quotation and of 'key-stages' in its development (see examples 13, 16-18), but this was done in a highly selective and often vague way, not as a precise documentation to ensure accurate understanding.

As examples (19)-(22) show, at the other, minimalist end of *cake*-allusions that contained no direct link to the 'possibility-impossibility' alternative, it is doubtful whether they can count as allusions to the proverb-application, even though they belong in the same debate of Brexit-legitimation/de-legitimation. In these cases, the metarepresentational resemblance is minimal so that no inferences can be drawn regarding the speakers' attitude to 'preceding' statements on the possibility/impossibility of *having/eating* the Brexit-*cake*. However, at least in one of these cases (example 19), the quoted speaker's articulation of the literal understanding of 'cake' as something 'to be eaten' was criticized as 'culpable' naivety, which may be a cased of the community of practice 'overruling' one usage as deficient in its metarepresentational awareness/quality. Intensive political debate seems to generate an imprecise but nevertheless functional metarepresentational discourse memory that extends over multiple rather than single preceding representations.

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[1] This database is part of a larger research corpus of figurative language use in British and German debates about European Union politics, EUROMETA (Author 2016: 14-15). The sample of press media that include applications of the *have/eat cake* proverb ranges across the political spectrum in Britain. It is drawn from print and online versions of *Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Financial Times, Marxism Today, New Statesman, The Daily Telegraph, The Economist, The Guardian, The Independent, The National, The New European, The Observer, The Scotsman, The Spectator, The Street, The Sun, The Times/Sunday Times, The Yorkshire Post.* The sample is evenly

balanced in terms of political leanings (around 60 articles for each of the pro-Brexit, anti-Brexit and indecisive/neutral media) but not statistically validated. Its purpose is not to give a quantitatively comprehensive overview but to show the maximum range of variation in usage.

[2] See Gimson 2006, 90-102; Purnell 2011: 106-126. Johnson has continued writing columns for the *Daily Telegraph* besides working for the magazine *Spectator* and as a politician since 2001 when he entered the House of Commons as MP for Henley.

[3] The term "scenario" is used here in the sense of an extended source domain frame that has narrative and argumentative structure in addition to event structure (Author 2006, 2016). In the case of the *have/eat cake* phrase, the mini-story of eating the cake has a default outcome, i.e. that the cake disappears. This outcome serves as a conclusion in the proverb's use as an analogical argument; its alternative, i.e. the possibility of keeping the cake represents a counterfactual outcome; hence the rhetorical salience of its metaphorical application as an assertive conclusion.

[4] Other EU-leaders who joined Tusk in condemning Johnson's *have/eat cake* phrase as misleadingly suggesting that the UK could enjoy the economic benefits of the Single Market after leaving the EU included the EU-Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, the French President François Hollande, Luxembourg's Prime Minister Xavier Bettel and the Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat as well as the EU Commission's Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier (Dallison 2017; *The Guardian,* 04/07/2017; *Daily Express,* 05/10/2016).

[5] Ayto (2010: 244) explains "cut off your nose to spite your face" as "disadvantage[ing] yourself in the course of trying to disadvantage another" and traces its use back to medieval Latin and French, from where it was loan-translated into early modern English.

[6] The *cherries* in this example allude to the dysphemistic term *cherry-picking* as a negative characterization of the British government's strategy of choosing only the best bits from the existing EU-regulations. It was used both independently and in conjunction with the *have/eat cake* phrase, and often attributed to EU-politicians such as D. Tusk, e.g. "Mr Tusk told reporters […] "It looks like the 'cake' philosophy is still alive. From the very start it has been a key principle of the EU27 that there can be no cherry picking" (*The Independent*, 24/02/2018).

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[7] See *The Daily Telegraph,* 05/03/2018: "I hope his colleagues let him have his moment. It would have been cruel to take him to one side afterwards, and explain it to him. 'Iain. Hi. That thing you said in the chamber about EU negotiations and cake.' – 'Cake exists to be eaten!' – 'Yes. It's just that… that's not what it means.'- 'Not what what means?'- 'The phrase, 'You can't have your cake and eat it.' It means… well,...'"

[8] For the main formulations of the two theory traditions see Sperber and Wilson 1981, Sperber and Wilson 1995: 237-243, Sperber and Wilson 1998, Wilson 2000 and Wilson and Sperber 2012 on the one hand, Grice 1975/1989, Clark and Gerrig 1984, Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995, on the other hand. Both traditions are compatible with – and to some extent founded on – metarepresentation theory (Allott 2017; Gibbs 2000: 408-409; Wilson 2000: 426) and recent approaches (Colston 2017, Willison 2017) pursue an "ecumenical" approach that investigates the contradiction relationship between the metarepresented and current utterance levels across different types of irony.