

# Truths, lies and figurative scenarios – Metaphors at the heart of Brexit

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## Abstract

In the wake of the British referendum to (Br)exit the European Union (EU), allegations of lying and misrepresentation have been levelled against the pro-Brexit campaigners. Whilst such criticism is supported by evidence concerning ‘facts and figures’ used in the campaign, it neglects to take into account the conceptual framing that made such ‘facts’ seem plausible for the public, specifically framing through metaphoric scenarios. This article studies one of the key-metaphors that has dominated British EU-debates for the past 25 years, i.e. the slogan, *Britain at the heart of Europe*. The discourse career of this metaphor shows a decline in its affirmative, optimistic use, and a converse increase of deriding uses to the point of declaring the *heart of Europe* irredeemably *diseased*, *dead*, *non-existent* or *rotten*. We argue that these changes in the metaphor scenario of the *heart of Europe* as a *body organ* helped to entice the British public to integrate information supplied by pro-Brexit campaigners into a narrative of a *dying EU*, which motivated their voting preferences. Statements that had been exposed as factually incorrect could thus still be accepted as fitting the narrative and were considered as more reliable than unframed pieces of counter-information supplied by the Brexit critics.

## 1. Introduction

Both in the run up to and in the wake of the “Brexit” referendum about Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union on 23 June 2016, the pro-Brexit campaign was accused of spreading lies about the European Union in order to exaggerate the benefits of leaving it, for instance, the claim that the United Kingdom paid £350million every week to the EU, which could be better used in Britain’s own national interest (for instance, by better funding for the National Health Service).<sup>1</sup> In fact, the £350 million figure did not

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. *The Daily Telegraph*, 03/06/2016: “‘It’s Project Lies!’ Michael Gove takes on the audience – and the experts’; *The Guardian*, 10/06/2016: ‘Why Vote Leave’s £350m weekly EU cost claim is wrong’; *The Independent*, 27/06/2016: ‘Brexit: Vote Leave wipes NHS £350m claim and rest of its website after EU referendum.’

take into account the UK's budget "rebate" and other financial gains from the EU, and anti-Brexit campaigners such as the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, his Conservative predecessor John Major, the former Liberal Leader Paddy Ashdown and the EU Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, accused the "Vote Leave" campaign of "lying" about the British contributions to the EU, as well as about other contentious topics, such as immigration figures and a potential EU-accession by Turkey (that would send millions more economic migrants to Britain).<sup>2</sup> In articles under headlines such as "Truth, lies and trust in the age of Brexit and Trump" (*The Guardian*, 16/09/2016), "Art of the lie" (*The Economist*, 10/09/2016) or "How did the language of politics get so toxic?" (*The Guardian*, 31/07/2016), journalists voiced the suspicion that public discourse in the UK had lost its hold on facts. But how can lies, misleading propositions and exaggerations still win the day even after they had been publicly exposed and criticised? After all, during the democratically fought campaign, the anti-Brexit camp had many chances to present their case to counter what they considered lies with corrections and criticism.

Apart from the political and socio-cultural factors that influenced the Brexit-outcome,<sup>3</sup> the fundamental questions of what counts as a "lie" and how truthful public discourse needs to be are at stake here. *Critical Discourse Studies* have shown many times over (Fairclough 1995, Fowler 1991; Wodak 2009a; Wodak and Chilton 2005, Wodak 2015), that the popular belief in political communication as being chiefly the conduit for factual information is itself an ideologically biased construction and not a realistic description. Discourse in general – and political discourse in particular – is as much about rhetoric,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Guardian*, 23/05/2016: 'David Cameron suggests defence minister is lying over Turkey joining EU'; *The Daily Telegraph*, 11/08/2016: 'Britain could be up to £70billion worse off if it leaves the Single Market after Brexit, IFS warns'; *The Guardian*, 15/09/2016: 'Brexit vote not surprising after years of lies about EU, says Jean-Claude Juncker'. *The Guardian*, 16/09/2016: 'Paddy Ashdown: "I turned to my wife and said, it's not our country any more"'. A few pro-Brexit campaigners actually conceded that the claim had been at least misleading. Even before the referendum took place, he Conservative MP John Redwood, a prominent "Vote Leave" campaigner, conceded that the figure was inflated; and one day after the vote, Nigel Farage, the leader of the *United Kingdom Independence Party* (UKIP) distanced himself explicitly from the claim (*The Northern Echo*, 09/06/2016: 'Sir John Major and Tony Blair team up to back Remain campaign'; *The Daily Telegraph*, 24/06/2016: 'Nigel Farage: £350 million pledge to fund the NHS was "a mistake"').

<sup>3</sup> For analyses of the political-cultural background of Brexit see Adler-Nissen 2016, Alexandre-Collier 2015a,b, Gifford 2014; Jackson et al. 2016; Lynch and Whitaker 2013; Wodak 2016.

emotion arousal and interactional influence as about factual information. To achieve this multi-functional effect (Jakobson 1960), all “informative” conceptualisations need to be integrated into semantic-conceptual “frames” (Fillmore 1975, Lakoff 2004, Musolff 2016), in which they ‘make sense’, i.e. count as truthful/reliable, false/doubtful or relevant/irrelevant.

One of the chief framing devices in public discourse is the use of metaphorical “scenarios”, i.e. figurative mini-narratives that carry with them an evaluative stance (Musolff 2006). A brief look at pre- and post-Brexit headlines demonstrates their ubiquity (figurative terms highlighted through italics):

- (1) Forget leaving - Britain does best *at the heart of Europe* (*New Statesman*, 05/03/2015)
- (2) What a British *divorce* from the EU would look like (*Financial Times*, 26/02/2016)
- (3) Without cooperation in Europe, *the roof will soon cave in* (*The Guardian*, 17/05/2016)
- (4) Boris Johnson: The EU wants a superstate, just as Hitler did (*The Daily Telegraph*, 14/05/2016)
- (5) David Cameron on EU referendum: let us not roll the dice on our children's future (*The Guardian* 03/06/2016)
- (6) Divided *we fall* (*The Economist* 18/06/2016)
- (7) Brexit: *a journey into the unknown* for a country never before so divided (*The Observer*, 26/06/2016)

Each of these headlines embeds the topical ‘informative’ conceptual element in a figurative scenario: in (1) the idea of Europe as having a heart, i.e. a centre that is attractive for Britain; in (2) Brexit is likened to the legal proceedings following a failed marriage; (3) presents the political system as a building which is endangered by a collapsing roof; in (4) one of the main Brexit-campaigners is quoted as comparing the EU’s policy goals to the notion of a Europe dominated by Nazi-Germany; (5) Cameron is quoted with a counter-warning that portrays Brexit supporters as reckless gamblers; (6) likens the UK and the EU to comrades-in-arms with an intertextual allusion to the

saying *United we stand, divided we fall*, and (7) paints the picture of dangerous journey on which Britain has embarked.

Such examples could easily be multiplied: in a preliminary survey of 145 UK press articles, amounting to more than 134.000 words and covering the period January 2015-September 2016, more than 300 instances of metaphor and simile usage have been counted, based on identification of semantic incongruity (Steen et al. 2010). The most prominent, recurrent source concepts were: FIGHTING/WAR, JOURNEY, NATURAL DISASTER, DIVORCE, GAMBLE, and BODY/HEART. Is this surfeit of verbal imagery just an accidental epiphenomenon of a ‘heated debate’ about a contentious topic, or does it point to a constitutive aspect of political crisis discourse that affects the perceived truthfulness of political communication? In the following sections, we will argue in favour of the latter position by analysing one metaphoric scenario for which a well-documented corpus of continuous usage over the past 25 years exists, i.e. the formulation, *Britain at the heart of Europe*.

## 2. The *heart-of-Europe* metaphor in British public discourse 1991-2016

The basis for the following discourse-historical analysis is a multilingual corpus of figurative press texts on EU-politics (EUROMETA) that goes back to 1990.<sup>4</sup> It includes 236 texts in its British sample alone, which contain 272 tokens of the *heart of Europe* metaphor. Just one third (32%) of all tokens are used by the journalists as primary authors, whereas 68% of all occurrences allude to the metaphor as used by other media or politicians. These quotative uses are by no means neutral; in fact, most of them express a positive or critical-negative stance, either through endorsing or critical comments or through reformulating and recontextualising the metaphor. Together with the primary uses, they constitute a dense, intertextual ensemble that builds up to a “virtual conversation” (Musolff 2011: 202), in which the metaphor creates discursive coherence

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<sup>4</sup> Overall, EUROMETA is currently 599.000 words large and has more than 2400 separate text entries. For a general overview and analysis of EUROMETA see Musolff 2004a; for detailed analyses of the *Britain at the heart of Europe* slogan in comparative (i.e. British-German) and discourse-historical perspectives see Musolff 2004b, 2013.

but also stays flexible enough to allow for creative reformulation and variation. As a consequence, the metaphoric slogan and its derogatory variants have become an index of the respective speakers' (EU-)political allegiances.

The phrase *at the heart of Europe* meaning 'at the centre' of European politics, i.e. the politics the "European Union" (until 1993, "European Community/Communities") can be found in UK political discourse before 1991 but it was the Conservative Prime Minister John Major who first applied it to the United Kingdom and established the slogan of *Britain at the heart of Europe* as an optimistic sounding promise in a speech in Germany in March 1991:

- (8) Our government will work at the very heart of Europe with its partners in forging an integrated European community (quoted in *The Guardian*, 12/03/1991).

Britain, as represented by Major's government, is assumed to be part of an entity "Europe", in which it cooperates with other "partners" to achieve further integration. The 'heart-as-centre' concept used here is a highly conventionalised idiom;<sup>5</sup> its metaphorical vividness, as relating to a bodily-organismic source domain, is minimal. Major hardly intended it as a "deliberate metaphor" (Steen 2011) or rhetorical highlight; as he states in retrospective interpretation, the *heart of Europe* statement and his whole speech were expressing his government's "self-evident" wish to "improve our profile in Europe" (vis-à-vis his predecessor M. Thatcher's more "euro-sceptical" stance) (Major 2000: 268-269). The initial reception was supportive; the liberal magazine *The Economist*, for instance, took the policy change almost for granted:

- (9) Of course Britain should be at the heart of Europe whenever it possibly can, for that is where the decisions that affect many British interests are being taken (*The Economist*, 23/11/1991).<sup>6</sup>

Later that year, however, after negotiations for a new European Community Treaty had led to his government's "opt-outs" from the planned common currency and "social charter", Major's parliamentary opponents questioned his enthusiasm for *closeness to the*

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<sup>5</sup> See Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 2002, vol. 1: 1213 and Roget's International Thesaurus, 1996: 143.

<sup>6</sup> For similar endorsements of Major's pro-European stance in 1991 see *The Guardian*, 13/03/1991; *The Economist*, 16/03/1991; *BBC*, 18/07/1991.

*heart of Europe* by contrasting his March speech with his negotiation results. The Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, asked him how he could “claim to be at the heart of Europe when, because of his actions, our country is not even part of the key decisions that will shape the Europe of the future” and the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Paddy Ashdown, alleged that Major had “condemned this country to be semi-detached from [the heart]” (Hansard 11/12/1991).

During the following two years, Major’s statement was quoted time and again as a reference point for a positive stance on Europe, with most commentators still giving him credit for attempting to keep Britain close to the centre of EU policies. In all instances of coverage – across the spectrum of political sympathies – it was still assumed that being close to the EU’s *heart/centre* was desirable. The main bone of contention was rather whether Major was able to maintain his stance or would have to give in to the euro-sceptical fraction of his own party, some of whom would later be among the pro-Brexit campaigners in 2016. His government’s perspective on the *heart of Europe* changed more generally, however, when in August 1994 the governing parties in France and Germany published proposals for further EU integration (CDU/CSU Fraktion des Deutschen Bundestags 1994). They envisaged a division of the Union into an “inner core” or “circle” of member states committed to faster socio-economic integration on the one hand and several outer “circles” of less committed states, to which Britain belonged.<sup>7</sup> Major immediately rejected the proposals, which led the pro-EU-leaning *Independent* newspaper to point out his dilemma of being too close to the centre of EU policy for his own party’s liking and not sufficiently close enough in the eyes of France, Germany and British EU-supporters:

- (10) He wanted Britain to be at the heart of Europe. Yet too often he found himself alone at the end of a limb. (*The Independent*, 08/09/1994).

If this comment still gave Major the benefit of the doubt and only mildly ridiculed his stance with the pun on the idiom ‘out on a limb’ (*Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, 1999, 864), another *Independent* article from a few days later denounced his

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<sup>7</sup> For analyses of this geometric metaphor scenario in German EC/EU debates see Reeves 1996.

position more sharply by reviving the *heart* idiom of the slogan as a full-blooded metaphor, so to speak, and using it for a sarcastic commentary:

- (11) One British metaphor, at least, has ceased to beat. John Major said in Bonn in March 1991, that he wanted to put Britain “where we belong, at the very heart of Europe”. ... Neither Mr Major nor, increasingly, others in Europe, have been speaking in quite this way .... An editorial ... earlier this year suggested that if Mr Major wanted to be at the heart of Europe, it was, presumably, as a blood clot. (*The Independent*, 11/09/1994).

In this commentary, the author, A. Marshall, attempted to sum up the course of the British EU-debate under Major’s government by comparing a perceived demise of the slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* with its initial launch. It (re-)activated its implicit body domain-related metaphoricity through using further *heart*-related phraseology (*ceased to beat*, *blood clot*) and achieved a recognition-plus-revelation effect that could be paraphrased as: ‘a deadly danger to the EU: that is what Major really wants/wanted to be.’ The commentary revived the metaphor in order to expose a discrepancy between Major’s rhetorical promise and political reality and to attack and denounce his public political ‘face’ (Brown and Levinson 1987) as a trustworthy politician.

Despite the above-quoted ‘obituary’ from 1994, the slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* managed to survive in political discourse, albeit at the cost of being reinterpreted and mocked in the ‘heart-as-organ’ sense. In 1995 the former EU official B. Connolly published a book under the title *The Rotten Heart of Europe* (Connolly 1995), which alleged widespread corruption in the EU bureaucracy and became a favourite of EU-opponents. Following Connolly’s lead, the former Tory Chancellor, N. Lamont, won standing ovations at a 1996 party debate when he declared that there was “no point at being at the heart of Europe if the heart is diseased” (*The Guardian*, 10/10/1996). By the time of the 1997 general election, the *Guardian* augured that the “‘Britain at the heart of Europe’ fudge” had destroyed Major’s authority (*The Guardian*, 17/04/1997). This verdict turned out to be a correct prediction of the Tories’ re-election chances.

The incoming Labour government under A. Blair wasted no time in reclaiming *Britain at the heart of Europe* as a pro-EU arguing slogan for themselves (*The Guardian*,

10/06/1997; 01/12/1997).<sup>8</sup> After the passing of their ‘honeymoon period’, however, they too experienced difficulties in trying to live up to that promise. As early as December 1997, the *Guardian* observed:

(12) The litany passes from government to government. A Britain at the heart of Europe. [...] But hold the stethoscope and listen carefully, for the heart has some curious murmurs. [The important debates in Brussels] bear no relationship to the British “debate”, hearts, livers, gall bladders and all. (*The Guardian*, 01/12/1997).

By dismissively calling the slogan a ‘litany’ and throwing the ‘heart’ reference in together with a random list of other organs, the writer, M White, rubbished the slogan as an empty formula that had become a mantra-like catchphrase with little currency outside Britain and no connection with EU policy.

Despite such warnings, Britain’s obsession with *Europe’s heart* became, if anything, even livelier in the following years – at the cost of a further deterioration of its optimistic slant, to the point of complete reversal. During the nepotism scandal of 1999 that led to the resignation of the EU commission, drastic denunciations of *the heart of Europe* spread across all the British press media: “Report [about the scandal] strikes at heart of Europe” (*The Guardian*, 16/03/1999); “the rotten heart of Europe will never be cleaned out” (*The Sun*, 17/03/1999); “changes in personnel will not be enough to stop the rot at the heart of the EU” (*Daily Mail*, 17/03/1999); “abruptly the heart of Europe got sick” (*The Economist*, 18/03/1999); “a hole suddenly opened up at the heart of the European Union” (*The Independent*, 21/03/1999); *The Sun*, 06/05/1998: “Britain can’t be at Europe’s heart. It doesn’t have one”.<sup>9</sup> As these examples indicate, *heart of Europe*-bashing was no longer confined to the diehard EU-sceptic press but became a kind of fashion across the whole political spectrum, due to “pressures of coherence” (Kövecses 2009) in the socio-political context.

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<sup>8</sup> For critical analysis of the political and diplomatic strategies underlying the “strong rhetorical commitment by Blair to place Britain at the heart of the EU” see Whitman 2016: 214-215; also Daddow 2013.

<sup>9</sup> For further variations on the *non-existent heart*-metaphor version see and Kremer 2004.



After Labour's defeat in 2010, the slogan still maintained its currency, with the new Tory-Liberal government attempting a cautious re-adoption, e.g. in promises by the conservative Foreign Secretary W. Hague and the Liberal Deputy Prime Minister N. Clegg to "put Britain back at the heart of Europe" (*The Scotsman*, 01/07/2010; *The Guardian*, 16/12/2011). With the growing likelihood of a Brexit referendum, however, denouncing *the heart of Europe* as dysfunctional or irrelevant for Britain became the dominant usage, despite a few 'rear-guard' optimistic defence statements such as example (1).<sup>10</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* commented on the "unstoppable process of integration [...] at the heart of the EU" by advising Cameron

- (13) that the only viable British relationship with the EU is one that keeps this country at a healthy distance from the whole doomed European project. (*The Daily Telegraph* 14/07/2015).

During the referendum campaign, the *Financial Times* (27/04/2016) resigned itself to the statement that "despite claims that Britain [was] at the heart of Europe, the reality [was] that for decades it has been on the periphery"; after its pro-Brexit outcome, *The Independent*, (26/06/2016) evaluated it as "a dagger [plunged by the British] into the heart of Europe"). Even after this latest *death*, however, the metaphor has proved too good to be left alone. The *Daily Telegraph* derided a moderately phrased Brexit-criticism by the EU's Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, as showing the "deep contempt at the heart of the European project for the collective will [...] of the people" (*The Daily Telegraph*, 23/08/2016), and the *Daily Express* (30/07/2016) gleefully claimed that growth in the euro-zone "at the heart of the failing EU project" was half that of the UK. The *heart of Europe* metaphor seems to have survived even Brexit, but most vividly, it appears, in references to a *sick, non-functioning* or *rotten* organ of a *dying* body.

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<sup>10</sup> For similar attempts, mainly by foreign politicians, see e.g., *Financial Times*, 10/01/2013: "Stay at heart of Europe, US tells Britain", and 23/02/2014: "Merkel calls for Britain to remain at heart of Europe"; *The Independent*, 27/11/2013: "Irish ambassador [...] urges Britain along path at heart of Europe".

### 3. Discussion

When surveying this ‘discourse career’ of the *heart of Europe* metaphor,<sup>11</sup> a distinctive trend towards semantic and pragmatic deterioration becomes visible, for all uses of the metaphor in the corpus have an evaluative bias, i.e. a positive or negative slant that expresses the current author’s (and where relevant, by the preceding, i.e. quoted author’s) stance (Jaffe 2012). The conventional connotations of the source domain concept ‘heart’, such as central importance and good state of health, are implied or expressly stated in the early uses but are increasingly put in question or negated over time. Although a validated statistical analysis of the corpus sample is impossible due to distribution imbalances, some indicative frequency changes in the corpus occurrences of the *heart-of-Europe* metaphor are notable. Direct-Positive,<sup>12</sup> direct-negative and indirect-quotative uses are roughly evenly matched only in the first years of the Major-led Conservative administration (1991-1994). After 1994, the indirect (quoted) tokens become more and more frequent (68% overall!), whereas the percentage of positive direct uses falls to 31% (1995-1998) and 26% (1999-2002), then slightly recovers to 31% (2002-2015); in the Brexit year 2016, it falls to an all-time low of 10%. The slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* thus gradually loses its function as an optimistic promise (i.e. ‘that being close to the heart is a good thing’) and is replaced by warnings that Britain is detaching itself from the EU centre or, even worse, that the European heart is *sick, dying, rotten* etc. In these latter cases, *Europe* is viewed not so much as a container-like entity with a geometrical centre (closeness to which may or may not be desirable), but rather as an

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of a ‘discourse career’ of metaphors as presented here relies on the discourse-historical approach developed by Wodak 2009b (for its application to metaphor history see Musolff 2014). It is not to be confused with the evolutionist ‘career’ model of conceptual structure mapping that Bowdle and Gentner (2005) have proposed to analyse the process of metaphor conventionalization. Their main focus is on the “shift in mode of mapping from comparison to categorization (2005: 193), to explain how a once unconventional metaphor becomes a widely used, familiar expression that is lexicalized and may later lose its figurative character. By contrast, our discourse-historical account of a ‘metaphor career’ spanning 25 years demonstrates that a metaphor may ‘survive’ best by being continuously re-invented according to a discourse community’s changing socio-communicative needs.

<sup>12</sup> The categories “direct”/“indirect” as used here refer to the “use/mention” distinction (Sperber and Wilson 1981): the “direct” metaphor versions are those *used* by the respective authors themselves, the “indirect” ones are *mentioned* in quotations or allusions to preceding uses by other speakers.

organism, i.e. an animal or human body, whose heart is the life-centre and, at least for humans, stereotypically also the seat of emotional and personal identity (Niemeier 2000). The *heart of Europe* in this organismic sense evokes the frames of the ‘nation-as-body’ and ‘nation-as-person’ metaphors, which have been highly influential in Western political history and philosophy and which are still pervasive in political discourse, especially in defensive conceptualisations of perceived ‘Others’ as *illnesses, parasites* or *alien bodies* that endanger the respective nation’s own *body politic* (Musolff 2010, Wodak 2015). In the mapping of ‘Europe-as a body/person’, however, the target concept is that of a multi-national political entity.<sup>13</sup> Such a conceptualisation is not conventional because it violates the ‘nation-focus’ of the traditional ‘state-body’ mapping. It is therefore incompatible with mappings of ‘Britain (or England) as a body/person’, which are still highly popular in British public discourse including Brexit-related rhetoric, e.g. by the former Prime Minister Cameron (Wodak 2016). From a British-nationalistic and/or euro-sceptical viewpoint, the concept of ‘Europe-as a body/person’ makes little sense except that of a *sick* or *dying body*, and the denunciations of that body’s *heart* as being *sick, dying, hard, cold, rotten*, which we found in euro-sceptical discourse, fit this scenario very well.

In order to fully appreciate this pragmatic deterioration, we also have to take into account that especially most of the metaphor uses in the sample (especially over the last two decades) are reactions to preceding positive uses by prominent politicians, e.g. Major and Blair in the ‘honeymoon phases’ of their terms of office.<sup>14</sup> Depiction of *Europe’s heart* as dysfunctional in these cases serve mainly to criticise and ridicule those preceding users as mistaken, naïve or deliberately misleading and thus to undermine their status as trustworthy speakers (from the viewpoint of the current speaker). Such uses are not just critical of the heart but serve to launch face-attacks against the respective preceding speakers as a) having failed in delivering on their promise (to put Britain at the heart of Europe) and b) failing to acknowledge the changed political reality (which is assumed to

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<sup>13</sup> For an overview over conceptualizations of Europe’s collective identity see Krzyżanowski 2010.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Independent*, 22/06/2016: “No wonder we’re on the brink of Brexit – our politicians have never made the case for Europe”; *Northern Echo*, 09/06/2016: “Sir John Major and Tony Blair team up to back Remain campaign”)

correspond to the notion of a *sick/dying heart*). Such attacks against the positively slanted slogan and its users increase dramatically at times of crisis in the UK-EU relationship, such as the frustrations of the Major government, e.g. the Franco-German proposals of 1994 and 1996 BSE-conflict, the 1999 EU commission nepotism scandal, and the Brexit campaign. During each of these periods, we see a spike in indirect, ironical-quotative uses of the slogan, as politicians and media commentators try to outperform each other in inventing and popularising ever more hyperbolic, sarcastic variations on the ‘stricken heart of Europe’ theme.

As a result, the positive-optimistic bias of the original slogan has lost a lot of its persuasive force and most frequently appears as the object of hostile allusions and quotations. Whilst positive uses do not disappear completely from the sample, they become so rare that they nowadays stand out as exceptional and unconventional, whereas the ‘ironical quotation’ variant assumes the role of the default version. Thus, when hearing or reading the slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* during the last years, the public could expect it to be ridiculed and negated. What was once seen as the ‘centre’ or ‘life-essence’ of European collective identity has become a discredited metaphor, which is derided as being only used positively by former elites who are out of touch with or want to manipulate the “will of the people”.<sup>15</sup>

#### **4. Metaphor scenarios and ‘facts’**

The above-sketched semantic and pragmatic deterioration of the slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* affects not only its own understanding but also that of the ‘facts and figures’ about the UK’s financial contribution to the UK and immigration, which were contested during and after the Brexit campaign. Viewed in the context of the scenario of a *sick/dying/rotten heart and body* of the EU, continued provision of financial support for the EU by the UK (in the metaphor scenario: *of nourishment*) appears as a complete waste of the nation’s resources; any further ‘in-fluence’ from the EU on the UK, be it

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<sup>15</sup> *The Daily Express*, 08/12/2016: “Brexit: Trust that the will of the people will be respected”; *The Daily Telegraph*, 20/08/2016: “Nigel Farage deserves a knighthood for giving the British their freedom”.

through immigration or through political control from Brussels seems like risking infection from a doomed organism (to which one should keep “a healthy distance”, see above: example 13).

This meaning change is, indeed, based on the framing power of metaphor that has often been highlighted by Critical Discourse Analysis. However, there is a further effect to be observed here when we relate the metaphor scenario to the evaluation of pieces of factual information as ‘truthful’ v. ‘misleading/wrong’. Such evaluations became a major issue in the run-up and aftermath of Brexit and have since been highlighted as part of a wider issue of “post-truth politics”.<sup>16</sup> If the EU’s *heart* (and thus the whole EU-*body*) is *dying*, the question of whether the exact amount of the UK’s financial support is £350 million is of minor importance; in fact, any amount of a significant magnitude appears in this a scenario as a waste of resources. Similarly, any amount of immigration or of political influence from the EU, whether small or large, appears to be *unhealthy* and increasing the danger of the nation’s *body* being *infected* in the *dying heart* scenario. Thus, in addition to highlighting a specific conceptual perspective at the expense of alternative conceptualisations, the scenario also undermined specific counter-arguments, i.e. in this case, the attempts by anti-Brexit campaigners to supply corrections of the pro-Brexit exaggerations (e.g. £350 million being wasted on the EU weekly or hundreds of thousands of EU-immigrants ready to enter the country). The anti-Brexit campaign spent a considerable amount of political and media activity (see footnotes 1 and 2 above) on trying to disprove pro-Brexit claims by arguing that UK-EU financial relations were more complex and Britain’s net contribution was considerably lower, that immigration figures were in fact much less; that Britain’s sovereignty was still inviolate, etc. However, such counter-information, if at all noticed at all by the voters, would appear to them largely irrelevant in the context of the *dying heart/body* scenario: whether it was £350, £250 or £150 million UK payment to the EU, or tens or hundreds of thousands of immigrants coming into the UK made for them no difference. A body with a *dying, dead, cold, rotten* or *non-existing heart* is worth neither nourishment expense nor being close to, let alone being influenced by.

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<sup>16</sup> See *The Economist*, 10/09/2016: “Post-truth politics: Art of the lie”, *The Guardian*, 16/12/2016: “Don’t call it post-truth. There’s a simpler word: lies”.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article we have shown that figurative scenarios such as the *heart of Europe* metaphor, which are firmly entrenched in a discourse community, provide a platform for introducing plausible frames for assessing and interpreting the facts and figures that the public uses to form their opinions on political issues. It is not the side with ‘the most’ or ‘best’ facts that wins but the one that which provides the most plausible, i.e. seemingly intuitively reliable scenarios. In the case of *Britain at the heart of Europe*, the slogan’s originally positive slant as an optimistic promise was successfully reversed by euro-sceptical pro-Brexit campaigners who resuscitated its bodily source domain to introduce a range of *illness-*, *death-* and *failure-*related versions, none of which were matched by counter-scenarios of pro-EU campaigners. In fact, the latter produced no variation at all on the slogan, which thus remained (at best) an abstract appeal to *be close/move closer to Europe’s centre* and became a routine quotation that was available for anyone to pun on. The Brexit opponents’ main communicative strategy seems to have been the effort to provide more (and more complex) factual information than the other side, regardless of the context in which it was socially received, psychologically processed and finally evaluated.

Something similar seems to have happened to other well-established metaphor scenarios in British public discourse, too. For instance, Brexit was valorised not just as putting a stop to wasting food on a dying body with a dead heart but also as the *liberation from a trap, a straitjacket* or even from beckoning a Nazi-superstate (*Daily Express*, 30/07/2016, *Financial Times*, 24/06/2016, *Daily Telegraph*, 14/05/2016), as well as a *divorce from a failed marriage* to a partner who was *in bad shape* and had proved to be *tired and sterile* (*Daily Express*, 13/11/2015, *The Economist*, 17/10/2015; *Financial Times*, 26/02/2016 and 22/07/2016, *The Guardian*, 22/04/2016 and 08/08/2016), or even as a *crusade for liberty* and a *beacon of hope* (*Daily Express* 13/11/2015, *Daily Mail* 30/06/2016). Compared with this wealth of ‘positive’ Brexit-framing the few counter-scenarios (*Brexit as a reckless gamble* or a *journey with unknown outcome*) only amounted to warnings of an uncertain future rather than suggesting achievable solutions.

The referendum outcome in favour of Brexit was, to say the least, not seriously put in question by them.

What, then, are the chances for combating the one-sided reframing of factual information in metaphor scenarios that lead to potentially fateful political decisions? Complaints about lies or about wrong, exaggerated or misleading representations of facts are, as we have seen, futile if they view the political public mainly as recipients of ever more facts and figures. Relying on information alone is not going to win political campaigns. Neglecting the framing power of metaphor scenarios is not a sign of ‘honesty’ but instead of arrogance or naivety about the need to convince voters through the use of rhetorical means. The affective, argumentative and also entertaining appeal of figurative framing makes facts and figures practically meaningful so that the recipients can build an opinion and possibly derive conclusions about them. This calls on the one hand for the innovative construction of counter-scenarios to ‘make sense’ of reliable information. A further lesson to be learnt is that if a semantic-pragmatic reversal of the scenario is possible, such as that from the optimistic *Britain at the heart of Europe* version to a sarcastic-derogatory version, a re-reversal is also possible, e.g. by way of exposing the other side’s rhetorical tricks. In autumn 2014, at a time when the Brexit referendum was being mooted by Cameron’s government as an election promise for 2015, one *Financial Times* article (30/10/2014) provided an example of deconstructing the slogan’s deterioration by making it the punchline of an invented dialogue between Cameron and the incoming new President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker:

- (14)        So just to clarify. Aside from not joining the euro, you want to limit the free movement of people, cut the power of the European Court and the European Parliament . . .

*David Cameron:* And since we are opting out of so much, we should pay less too.

*Jean-Claude Juncker:* This is quite a list of demands, David. What do we get in return?

*David Cameron:* A Britain at the heart of Europe, of course.

Cameron’s final answer can be read as ironically revealing Britain’s minimalist commitment to the EU, i.e. that it amounts to no more than an empty slogan. This

conclusion is achieved by way of a re-re-contextualisation of the metaphor's meaning that presupposes both the primary optimistic scenario and its deterioration to a point where its message has become self-referential: Cameron's Britain (as viewed by the *Financial Times* journalist) claims to be 'at the heart of Europe' on no other grounds than its own say-so. A more trenchant denunciation of the loss of significance which that slogan has suffered is hardly imaginable. The *Financial Times*'s spoof-article did not prevent Brexit, but at least it exposed the slogan's hollowness at the time of its publication. If anything, it shows that those who wish to argue in favour of a positive British EU-engagement should either do without the slogan or give it a new life by explaining how its original promise can be adapted to the post-Brexit context.

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