How metaphors can shape political reality
The figurative scenarios 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, misrepresentation, exaggeration and inflammatory, “toxic” rhetoric have been levelled against the pro-Brexit campaigners. Whilst such criticism is indeed supported by evidence concerning isolated ‘fact and figures’ used in the campaign, it neglects to take into account the conceptual and narrative framing of the Brexit-relevant statements, specifically framing through metaphoric scenarios. This article studies in detail one of the key-metaphors that has dominated British EU-debates for the past 25 years, i.e. the slogan of ‘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 and ridiculing uses to the point of declaring the heart of Europe irredeemably diseased, dead, non-existent or rotten. We argue that this historical trend is not just a “reflection” of changing attitudes towards the EU in Britain but also itself a driving force in those changes, insofar as it provided the presuppositions that made it possible for both the media and members of the public to make sense of any new information details. It is thus not so much the accuracy of specific statements that is at stake in the public debate but rather their integration into a scenario, which makes them appear more or less plausible. As a result, statements that were exposed as factually incorrect could still be accepted as fitting the dying heart scenario and be considered as more reliable than complex but unframed ‘counter-information’.

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 £350 million 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. In fact, the £350 million figure did not 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, openly accused the “Vote Leave” campaign of “lying” not only about budget questions but also by inflating immigration figures and insinuating an impending EU-accession by Turkey that would send millions more economic migrants to Britain.

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 a suspicion that public discourse in the UK had lost its hold on facts and become an arena of reckless and inaccurate statements. But how can “lies”, misleading propositions and exaggerations still win the day even after they had been publicly exposed and criticised, as had been the case during the Brexit campaign? After all, the pro-Brexit camp did present their case and their facts and countered what they considered lies with corrections and accusations.

Apart from the many political, socio-cultural and historical factors that influenced the Brexit-outcome, the popular understanding of what counts as a “lie” seems to be at stake here as well as the underlying presupposition that the main characteristic of political discourse is or should be the media’s and politicians’ communication of “facts”, i.e. pieces of “truthful” information to the recipients. But is such an assumption justified or even plausible? Critical Discourse Studies have shown many times over (Fairclough 1995; Fowler 1991; Wodak 2009a; Wodak & Chilton 2005), that this model of political communication as the transmission of factual information is itself an ideologically biased construction and far from a realistic description. Discourse is as at least as much about argumentation, emotion arousal and interactional influence as about ‘factual’ information. To achieve this multi-functional effect (Jakobson 1960), any “informative” conceptualisations need to be integrated into a “frame” (Fillmore 1975; Lakoff 2004; Musolff 2016), in which they

1 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’.

2 The Guardian, 23/05/2016: ‘David Cameron suggests defence minister is lying over Turkey joining EU’; The Daily Telegraph, 10/08/2016: ‘Britain could be up to £70 billion 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: the Conservative MP John Redwood, a prominent “Vote Leave” campaigner, conceded that the figure was inflated; and one day after the vote, one of the Brexit campaign leaders, Nigel Farage, the leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) while celebrating the result as his greatest achievement, distanced himself 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”’).
make sense, i.e. count as truthful/reliable, false/doubtful or irrelevant. One of the chief framing devices is the use of metaphors and similes in figurative scenarios (Charteris-Black 2005; Goatly 2007; Lakoff 1996; Musolff 2016). A brief look at some 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)
(8) After winning power, Theresa May faces Brexit divorce battle (Daily Mail, 13/07/2016)

Each of these headlines embeds information or explicit stance taking in a figurative scenario: in (1) the idea of the Europe as having a heart (centre); 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 to the notion of a Europe dominated by Nazi-Germany; in (5) Cameron is quoted with a counter-warning that portrays the Brexiteers as reckless gamblers; (6) presents the UK and the EU as comrades, (7) evaluates Brexit as a natural catastrophe; and (8) 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 needs to be taken into account when assessing the truthfulness (or lack thereof) of all political communication? In the following sections, we aim to show that metaphors are of central importance for what is regarded as truthful
or ‘honest’ political discourse, on the basis of analysing the example of the metaphorical slogan *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 sketch of the slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* is a multilingual corpus of figurative press texts on EU-politics (EUROMETA) that goes back to 1990 and includes 236 texts in its British sample, which contain 272 tokens of the metaphor. Just one third (32%) of all tokens are authored by the journalists directly to describe or comment on the Britain-EU relationship, whereas 68% are attributive uses that report or allude to the slogan as used by other speakers (i.e. mainly politicians). These derived uses are, however, by no means neutral but often include positive endorsing or critical, disparaging comments, with many of the latter ridiculing the slogan by way of referring to stereotypically negative heart- and body-related concepts, as we shall see shortly. These derived uses can be characterised as communicative “follow-ups” in the broad sense of Fetzer & Weizman (2015), i.e. evaluative reactions to prior communicative actions, which can “span across longer sequences within the same discourse and be assigned the status as an object of talk” (Fetzer & Weizman 2015: xii). Together with the primary uses they constitute a dense, intertextual ensemble of metaphor uses that build up to a kind of virtual conversation (Musolff 2011: 202), in which the focal slogan becomes the object of continuous reinterpretation and creates discursive coherence, whilst at the same time staying flexible enough to allow for variation as regards a differential highlighting of specific source domain aspects and opposing pragmatic exploitations. Some politicians used the metaphor to defend a stronger British “engagement” in the EU whilst others employed it to argue in favour of a withdrawal from the *heart of Europe*. As a consequence, the metaphor, together with its derogatory variants of the unhealthy/non-functioning heart, became an index of the speakers’ (EU-)political allegiances.

The phrase *at the heart of Europe* meaning ‘at the centre of European politics (i.e. the politics of the “European Community” as predecessor of the “European Union”)’ can be found in UK political discourse before 1991 but it was the then 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 that year:

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3 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 (2004b); for detailed analyses of the history of the *Britain at the heart of Europe* slogan in comparative (i.e. British-German) and discourse-historical perspectives, see Musolff (2004a, 2013).
(9) 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)

Initially this statement was met mainly with positive responses in both Britain and Germany, as it seemed to announce a break with the “Eurosceptic” stance of Major’s direct predecessor as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. The liberal magazine The Economist took the policy change almost for granted: “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). Later that year, however, after negotiations for a new European Community Treaty 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 heart of Europe by contrasting his March speech with his negotiation results. The then 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 his officially positive stance on Europe, with the majority of commentaries 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 “eurosceptical” fraction of his own party (many of whom were among the pro-Brexit campaigners in 2016). His government’s perspective on the heart of Europe changed, however, fundamentally when in August 1994 the governing parties in France and Germany published draft proposals for further political EU integration (CDU/CSU-Fraktion des Deutschen Bundesstags 1994). These papers 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. When Major rejected the proposals, the pro-EU-leaning Independent newspaper pointed 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: “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, 08/091994). If this comment still gave Major the benefit of the doubt and only mildly ridiculed his stance with the

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4For the German reception, see Musolff (2004b: 104-105).
5For analyses of this geometric metaphor scenario in German EC/EU debates, see Reeves (1996).
pun on the idiom ‘out on a limb’, another Independent article denounced his position more scathingly by reviving the heart idiom of the slogan as a full-blooded metaphor, so to speak, and using it for a sarcastic commentary:

(10) 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 meta-communicative comment on the course of the British EU-debate, the author, Andrew Marshall, follows up the perceived demise of the slogan Britain at the heart of Europe by reminding his readers of its initial launch, resuscitating its metaphoricity by punning on the source-domain, e.g. through the use of heart-related phraseology (ceased to beat), and using a further (quoted) pun to achieve a recognition-plus-revelation effect that could be paraphrased as: ‘so that is what Major really wanted to be in EU politics.’ The commentary thus both quotes and reuses the metaphor in order to expose a discrepancy between Major’s rhetorical promise and political reality. As a follow up remark it is echoic and dissociating/ negative but it is too critical to count as mere irony. Its implicature is that Major wanted not just the metaphor but the EU ‘project’ itself dead! It thus attacks and denounces his public political ‘face’ (Brown & Levinson 1987) as a trustworthy politician.

Despite its above-quoted ‘obituary’ back in 1994, the slogan Britain at the heart of Europe has managed to ‘survive’ until today. Over more than two decades, it has been reassigned several times in its sense as an optimistic ‘promise’ to successive governments, and was in turn recycled for critical follow-ups by their opponents. EU-sceptics now started to attack and cancel the assumption of any desirability for being close to Europe’s heart. In 1995 the former EU official B. Connolly published a book under the telling 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, in a repartee to a pro-heart/pro-EU statement by the former British EU-commissioner, L. Brittan, 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

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6Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase & Fable (1999: 864): “Out on a limb. Isolated, stranded or cut off, as an animal at the end of a branch of a tree”. The formulation “at the end of a limb” is perhaps a mix-up triggered by the ‘END OF X’ source notion.
prediction of the Tories’ re-election chances.

The incoming Labour government under Tony Blair wasted no time in reclaiming Britain at the heart of Europe as an optimistic, pro-EU arguing slogan from Major (The Guardian, 10/06/1997; 01/12/1997). 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 that: “the litany [was passing] 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, Michael White, then the Guardian’s political editor, rubbishes the slogan as an empty formula that has become a mantra-like catchphrase with little or no currency outside Britain and no connection with EU policy.

Despite such warnings and slogan-obituaries, Britain’s obsession with Europe’s heart became, if anything, even livelier in the following years—but at the cost of a further deterioration of its optimistic slant, to the point of complete reversal. During a nepotism scandal in March 1999 that led to the resignation of the EU commission, drastic denunciations of the heart of Europe spread across the press media, as the following examples show:

(11) [Commission] Report strikes at heart of Europe (The Guardian, 16/03/1999)
(12) […] the rotten heart of Europe will never be cleaned out. (The Sun, 17/03/1999)
(13) […] changes in personnel will not be enough to stop the rot at the heart of the EU. (The Daily Mail, 17/03/1999)
(14) […] abruptly the heart of Europe got sick. (The Economist, 18/03/1999)
(15) […] a hole suddenly opened up at the heart of the European Union. (The Independent, 21/03/1999)

As these examples indicate, heart of Europe-bashing and –ridiculing was no longer confined to diehard EU-sceptic press media but became a kind of fashion for a while, due to “pressures of coherence” (Kövecses 2009) in the socio-political context. The slogan never recovered fully from this sustained attack. In the following years, the media routinely punned on it by linking its central conceptual heart element to real-life body- and illness-topics. During the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001, The Guardian derided Labour’s EU-credentials by linking other EU member states’ views of Britain to recently imposed public

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7 For an 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: 2014–2015).
8 For further variations on the non-existent heart-metaphor version, see The Sun, 06/05/1998: “Britain can’t be at Europe’s heart. It doesn’t have one” and Kremer (2004).
hygiene measures: “When the time [...] comes for Tony Blair to make good his promise to be ‘at the heart of Europe’ [...] the neighbours might offer him a look of pity and a cup of sweetened tea—but only after he has wiped his feet in a trough of disinfectant” (The Guardian, 04/04/2001). In a conflict with France over a refugee camp at Calais, the Sun mocked the PM by inventing a European ‘response’ gesture: “Tony Blair says he wants Britain to be at the heart of Europe. Well it looks this morning as if Europe is showing us its backside” (The Sun, 03/09/2001).

After Labour’s defeat in 2010, the slogan still maintained its currency in British public discourse, 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 – but not by the Prime Minister David Cameron – 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). The Daily Telegraph commented on the “unstoppable process of integration [...] at the heart of the EU” by advising Cameron “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). 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”. Brexit itself was described as “a dagger [plunged by the British] into the heart of Europe” (The Independent, 26/06/2016). Even after this latest death, the metaphor has proved too good to be left alone by the pro-Brexit-press. The Daily Telegraph derided the criticism of the Brexit policy by the EU’s Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, as demonstrating “a 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) claimed that Britain should consider itself lucky not to be part of the eurozone “at the heart of the failing EU project”. The heart of Europe metaphor lives on in British political discourse, but most vividly, it appears, in the form of a sick, non-functioning or rotten organ of a dying body.

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”.  

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3 Discussion

When surveying this ‘discourse career’ of the heart of Europe metaphor, a distinctive trend towards semantic and pragmatic deterioration becomes visible: as regards the metaphor ‘content’, i.e. the implications of the source domain concept heart, its central importance and good state of health, which is taken for granted in all early uses but also in further pro-EU and anti-Brexit uses, is increasingly put in question or negated. The main pragmatic implicature of the slogan in specific speech acts, i.e. the optimistic promise that being close to the heart is ‘a good thing’ (for Britain), is also affected by this trend: in its place we find a) admonitions that Britain is detaching itself from the EU centre or b), in extensions of the wider organismic domain that the heart concept belongs to, warnings against closeness to the sick, dying, rotten heart. Interestingly, in such cases of negative framing, the earlier, positive default bias of a healthy heart concept is still pragmatically present. In the admonitions that Britain is detached from the heart, the organ’s presumed centrality and health is preserved as a presupposition: the criticism concerns the target level of assessing Britain’s distanced position. In the vivid warnings of the futility or danger of being close to an unhealthy heart, this presupposition is explicitly negated and emphatically rejected but it is still present as a pragmatic trace in the form of an allusion or direct quotation of an earlier positive use.

As mentioned before, two thirds of all instances of metaphor use in the Britain at the heart of Europe sample are follow-ups, i.e. reactions to preceding positively slanted uses by prominent politicians (in most cases: Major and Blair during the ‘honeymoon periods’ of their terms of office). The ironic or sometimes sarcastic effect of highlighting the heart of Europe as sick, dying, hard, cold, rotten, made of stone or non-existent derives its pragmatic polemical effect from the contrast to its previous taken-for-granted health—and the alleged belief in that health on the part of the precedent speaker. Thus, it is not only the metaphor or its source content that is denounced but its status as a plausible slogan and

10 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 & Gentner (2005) have proposed to analyse the conventionalization of metaphors. The conceptual ‘career’ change they focus on is the ‘shift in mode of mapping from comparison to mapping to categorization (Bowdle & Gentner 2005: 193), which is necessary for a once unconventional metaphor to become a widely used, familiar expression that is further lexicalized and may later even lose its figurative character (dead metaphor). Whilst this career model is plausible for the long-term semantic development of metaphors, our discourse-historical data spanning just 25 years seem to show that a metaphor may ‘survive’ best by being continuously recycled and re-invented according to the socio-communicative need of speakers in changing political contexts.

11 Although a validated statistical analysis is impossible due to gaps in the documentation for several years, indicative relative frequency changes in the corpus distribution are notable: only in the first years of the Major-led Conservative administration (1991-94), are positive and negative/ironical and quotative uses roughly evenly matched (47%/53%). After 1994, the percentage of positive uses falls significantly to 31% (1995-1998) and 26% (1999-2002), then slightly recovers to 31% (2002-2015); in the Brexit year 2016 (no full figures available), it appears to be falling to an all-time low of 20%.
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the status of its user as a trustworthy politician. From the viewpoint of *heart of Europe*-sceptics, the precedent speakers appear as delusional or naïve or deliberately misleading or as ‘yesterday’-politic’s who have not caught up with the newly fashionable derision about the EU’s *heart*. Even at the height of the Brexit campaign, i.e. a quarter of a century after the first prominent usage, the *Independent* (22/06/2016) reminded its readers that it had been John Major who “tried to put Britain ‘at the heart of Europe’” but had only achieved opt-outs, and an online-commentator “May.B.Knot” to the *Northern Echo* (09/06/2016) saw him as having “ended up more at odds with his [EU] partners than ever”.

The semantic deterioration of the metaphor, *heart of Europe*, is complemented by a pragmatic devaluation of its usage in meta-communicative comments: not only are positive instances of its use decreasing in terms of frequency and saliency but they are ridiculed and reemployed to launch explicit face-attacks against the respective speakers as a) having failed in delivering on the implicated optimistic promise and b) clinging to the slogan as an expression of ‘obsolete’ opinions. 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 such periods, we see a spike in ironical-quotative uses of the slogan, as media commentators compete with each other in producing ever more hyperbolic, sarcastic variations on the ‘stricken heart of Europe’ theme. As a result, the positive bias of the slogan as an optimistic catchphrase is severely damaged in the eyes of the public, it loses its persuasive function and most frequently appears as the object of more or less hostile allusions and quotations. Whilst positive uses do not disappear completely, they become so rare that they 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*, the public will routinely expect it to be ridiculed and negated and suspect it of being even manipulative. The many representations of the *heart of Europe* that refer to cases of corruption and “democratic deficit” finally lead to comments such as the above-cited diagnosis of “a deep contempt at the heart of the European project for the collective will [...] of the people” (*Daily Telegraph*, 23/08/2016). What was once seen as the ‘centre’ or ‘essence’ of European communal identity is now at best irrelevant, at worst a hypocritical catchphrase that is supposedly used by elites who are out of touch with or want to manipulate the “will of the people”.

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12 Major himself has acknowledged in his autobiography that his as “unexceptional” intended metaphorical formulation created “havoc” in his party and had been “misrepresented” (by his detractors) as expressing acceptance of EU-“federalism” (*Major 2000: 269–270*). The criticism is of course primarily directed at his EU-sceptic opponents in the Conservative party but also implies the admission that his own metaphor slogan was successfully ‘turned’ against him as its “misrepresentation” became the dominant interpretation.
4 Conclusion

The above-sketched reversal of semantic and pragmatic implications of the different scenarios that the slogan *Britain at the heart of Europe* accesses (*healthy* vs. *sick/dying heart*) affects not only its own understanding but also that of the ‘facts and figures’ that were contested as “lies” or “truths” about the prospects of Brexit. Within the scenario of a *sick/dying/rotten heart* of the EU, and hence a *sick/dying/rotten body or organism*, the provision of financial support for the EU (in the metaphor scenario: *of nourishment*) appears as a complete waste, if not worse, of a nation’s resources. Whether the precise amount of that support is £350 million or not is of minor importance; in fact, any amount of a significant magnitude appears, in this scenario, as a waste. The anti-Brexit campaigners’ supply of alternative facts and figures, which included much more complex calculations of the mutual financial payments between the EU and the UK, were for most recipients beside the point: whether it was £150 million, £250 million or £350 million made no difference to them. A body with a *dying, dead, cold, rotten or non-existing heart* is not worth any nourishment expense.

The socio-pragmatic power of the contextualisation of information is based to a considerable extent on the figurative scenarios, which appear to provide a clear guidance for assessing and interpreting the facts and figures that each side quote to support their case. It is not the side with the most or best facts that wins but that which provides the most plausible, i.e. seemingly intuitively reliable scenarios. The reversal of the *Britain at the heart of Europe* slogan, which had begun, as we have seen, long before the Brexit campaign, is only one of many scenarios that facilitated the perception of any kind of positive EU-engagement – whether political, financial or social – as an irresponsible and reckless waste of national resources. Supporting Brexit was valorised not just as putting a stop to wasting food on a dead body but also as the liberation e.g. from a trap, a straitjacket or even from a Nazi-superstate (*Daily Express*, 30/07/2016; *Financial Times*, 24/06/2016; *Daily Telegraph*, 14/05/2016), as well as from a partner that was in *bad shape* and had proved to be *failed, tired and sterile* (*Daily Express*, 13/11/2015; *The Economist*, 17/10/2015), a *clean break* from a *failed marriage* (*Financial Times*, 26/02/2016, 22/07/2016; *The Guardian*, 22/04/2016, 08/08/2016), or even 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 (*closeness to the heart of Europe* in the old sense, *refraining from a gamble* with future generations’ chances, a *journey with unknown outcome*) appeared not only less frequently in the Brexit debate but also as outdated and without a clear outcome. They amounted to warnings of an uncertain future rather than suggesting achievable solutions.

What chances are then left for combating the one-sided reframing of factual informa-
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tion 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 assume that the political public were mainly interested in learning ever more and ever more complex facts and figures. Given that the vast majority of the wider public are non-experts, relying on sheer information is not going to win any political campaign: the affective, argumentative and possibly also entertaining appeal of figurative language use must not be underestimated or neglected. This calls on the one hand for the innovative construction of counter-scenarios on the part of genuinely enthusiastic campaigners, so that they are not outdone by more active rhetoricians on the other side. A further lesson to be learnt is that if a semantic-pragmatic reversal of the scenario implications is possible, such as that from the optimistic Britain at the heart of Europe version to a sarcastic-derogatory scenario, a re-reversal is also possible, or at least the exposure of what the other side has done to a once meaningful metaphor. In autumn 2014, at a time when the Brexit referendum was first mooted in earnest by Cameron’s government in the run-up to the national elections of 2015, the Financial Times (30/10/2014) made an attempt at deconstructing the slogan’s semantic and pragmatic ‘deterioration’ by making it the punchline of an invented dialogue between Cameron and the incoming new President of the EU Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker. At the end of a long list of demands for excepting the UK from EU-commitments uttered by the fictional Cameron, the equally fictional Juncker summed up:

(16) 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.

The dialogue being fictional, the final answer by Cameron can only be read ironically. At the surface level of the spoof-conversation its implied promise of Britain’s closeness to the heart of Europe is a contradiction of all the opt-outs and negative demands uttered before. As such, it seems to show the chutzpah of a deliberately provocative dialogue partner, which, if true, could have caused a political scandal. However, as a fiction, the dialogue is an improbable source of facts for the (relatively well-informed) Financial Times readers; instead it makes much more sense if read as an implicit comment on the UK-EU relationship. At this global level, Cameron’s final answer must be read as revealing Britain’s minimalist commitment to the EU, i.e. that it amounts to nothing 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 is the message itself: 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 slogan’s loss of significance is hardly imaginable. The Financial Times’s spoof-report did not prevent Brexit but at least it exposed the slogan’s semantic and pragmatic hollowness. If anything, it shows that those who wish to argue for a positive British EU-engagement should do for a while without that slogan.

References


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