

Discourses of borders, immigration and the nation: the politics and language of exclusion.

Field of Study : Linguistics, Political Science, Border Studies

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this research project is the analysis of how borders have become an essential part of modern British political discourse, more specifically of the nativist and exclusive rhetoric of the nation typical of right-wing and extreme-right-wing movements and parties. This occurs through narratives which outline the dangers impending upon the nation from the arrival, potential or actual, of “strangers” or “aliens”, such as immigrants or refugees as well as EU citizens, who, according to the populist and nationalist discourse, threaten the integrity of the British nation by violating its borders and endangering its supposed unity in terms of national identity.

This project will investigate a range of texts produced by some of the main British political actors. It will do so by employing an interdisciplinary approach involving Linguistics (and specifically Discourse Analysis), Politics and Border Studies. In this sense, the project is based on an innovative interdisciplinary and holistic approach to the study of public discourse, tracing its social and ideological origins and its discursive and linguistic strategies, while also highlighting the dangers it poses to society as a whole.

The UK serves as an important case study, as recent violent episodes against immigrants and generally non-white communities outline the role of racist, nativist and nationalist rhetoric in contemporary political discourse, a role which is not confined to fringe movements but has increasingly been part of mainstream political discourse. The ultimate aim of this research project is to develop a methodological blueprint for a comparative study of political discourse within other European countries.



Research aims and methodology

The project focuses on the representation of borders in British political discourse in a variety of texts which include official government statements as well as speeches, interviews and social media discourse (e.g. Facebook, X, Instagram) produced by various political actors. The project intends to explain and contextualise the causes of certain nationalist, populist and, often, racist insurgencies which seem to be on the rise in Europe. The recent episodes of violence in the UK following the murder of three young girls raise some important questions regarding the nature of political discourse and, in some cases, it would seem, the legitimisation of violence. The riots in Southport were only the latest (and one of the most violent) outcomes of a dangerous mixture of racism, hate speech, misinformation and conspiracy theories, which target certain communities (usually non- white and non-Christian) seen as an existential threat to the nation and its citizens. These processes are neither new nor isolated – they are in fact quite widespread in many nations of the EU as well as the USA – and are based on a kind of language which often incites to hate and violence. The nation and its people are seen as being under threat and in need of defence, first of all by strengthening or closing borders and preventing the arrival of unwanted strangers. This isolationist ideology has its roots in a discursive construction of the nation based on the parallel cleavage of inclusive and exclusive identities, i.e. “us” vs “them”, which are constructed and legitimised in discourse.¹

Running counter to an increasingly globalised world, this isolationist and nativist ideology lay behind the Brexit referendum in 2016 and was given fresh impetus by the pandemic in 2020. The outcome of the Brexit referendum, with the UK leaving the EU, stemmed from a generalised distrust of EU institutions as well as a sense of fear that many felt towards immigrants. Similarly, national governments including the UK reacted to the resurgence of Covid-19 by reasserting the sovereignty of the nation: the forced closure of borders, carried out by most countries in the world in order to allegedly contain the spread of the virus, gave rise to a renewed sense of national power and pride and stimulated the nativist and isolationist tendencies underlying a certain idea of the nation.² In both Brexit and the pandemic, borders have played a crucial role in representing, symbolically, socially as well as physically, the line of defence of the nation. They are frequently at the centre of debates and discourses involving the politics, society and identity of the nation. They are inevitably used as the key geopolitical, symbolic and physical instrument to contain dangers from the “other” outside the nation and protect its people. Borders are also often instrumental in shaping discourses of security, fear and hate at the basis of much of contemporary politics; they are part of discourses which are seen as fanning the flames of anger and hate directed towards an “other” (the migrant, the refugee, the Chinese, the European) who is selected as the target of hate, especially among those weaker social groups who feel an impending sense of threat to their existence – and the existence of the nation in which they live.

The project will employ the interdisciplinary methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for the analysis of political discourse relating to borders and the nation. CDA is a methodology that considers language and discourse as an integral part of social processes: linguistic choices are at the basis of the way the world is represented to us, and such choices are crucial, particularly in those discourses, such as politics and media, which underpin public opinion. In this sense, CDA highlights the deterministic nature of language, which both reflects and shapes the social reality in which we live. It does so through the identification and analysis of specific linguistic choices which naturalise the rhetoric of exclusion and hate, legitimising it as a course of political (and often violent) action.³

¹ Wodak, R., de Cillia, R., Reisigl, M., Liebhart, K., Hirsch, A., Mitten, R., & Unger, J. W. (2009). *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh University Press.

² Wodak, R. (2020). *The Politics of Fear. The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*. Sage.

³³³ Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (Eds.) (2009). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (2nd revised edition). Sage; Wodak, R. (Ed.) (2013). *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Sage.



Relevance and added-value of the proposed research in relation to the current state of knowledge

The project will develop a new interdisciplinary area of research by mixing the approaches and methodologies from several disciplines. Borders have been studied extensively in Politics as part of research on the Nation. They are also the interdisciplinary focus of Border Studies, which however, so far, does not include Linguistics or Discourse Analysis.⁴ On the other hand, CDA has often addressed the discursive and linguistic basis of discriminatory practices in society, especially against marginalised social groups such as migrants, although it has very rarely addressed borders specifically. The work carried out by Massimiliano Demata stands as an exception, with one dedicated volume and a number of articles and book chapters on the central value of borders in the context of the political discourse of the USA.⁵

An upcoming book chapter by Demata and Ruth Wodak further systematizes the main theoretical and methodological frame of a CDA approach to borders, seen as a key trope for the construction of an exclusive sense of identity and discriminatory notions of nationalism. A CHORAL PhD programme in this area will therefore strongly contribute to the development of a field of study which is central to a new understanding of modern society and the dangers arising from discriminatory or violent language.

Interdisciplinary nature of the research together with the alignment with the CHORAL programme and complementarity expertise of the teams

The research has a strictly interdisciplinary nature as it will combine critical methodologies and insights from Linguistics, Politics and Border Studies. The research proposed here fulfils the objectives of the CHORAL programme, and specifically the section titled “Intangible CH and identity narratives”: it touches on issues regarding the construction of identity and a set of issues intersecting it, including globalisation, immigration and nationalism.

The research team supervising this project is unique in its interdisciplinary approach and in the complementarity of its expertise. Massimiliano Demata is Associate Professor of English Linguistics at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society of the University of Turin. He considers language to be an integral, essential part of Social Science and to be crucial for an understanding of complex social dynamics such as those presenting themselves in the current political context. His research, teaching and publication output reflect his thorough knowledge of society and politics, and his interdisciplinary work on the discourses of borders, nationalism, populism and conspiracy theories has been very influential in both Political Science and Linguistics. Miguel-Angel Benitez Castro is Senior Lecturer at the Department of English and German Philology of Universidad Zaragoza. His research focuses on the multi-layered realisation and functioning of persuasive discourse and evaluation (emotion and opinion) in populist public discourse, online extremist propaganda, the press and in oral narratives of trauma and abuse. He has participated in several trans- and inter-disciplinary research projects and has worked alongside researchers in disinformation processes, and political science and security on the development of tools to detect extremist online discourse.

Whilst the focus of the research is not on a romance language country, the UK can serve as a useful case- study pinpointing where these different narratives clash, providing valuable insights for other European countries and a blueprint for analysis to be applied to other cultures and languages.

⁴ Jones, R. (2012). *Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India, and Israel*. Zed Books ; Vallet, E. (Ed.) (2016). *Borders, Fences and Walls: State of Insecurity?* Routledge.

⁵ Demata, M. (2017) ““A great and beautiful wall”. Donald Trump’s populist discourse on immigration.” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 5(2): 277-97 ; Demata, M. (2021) “Keeping the Threat Out. Trump’s Discourse, the Wall and the “Other.”” *Altre Modernità* 27, 270-86; Demata, M. (2022). *Discourses of Borders and the Nation*. Routledge.



Output plan including publication and dissemination activities

The recruited PhD student will be expected to follow up on and develop existing UNITA projects, notably that on *Experiments in Democracy: Refugee Policy and Innovation in Democratic Praxis and Discourse*. The project was launched in autumn 2021 and received funding from UNITO in 2023. It resulted in a book, *La solidarietà discreta. L'accoglienza dei rifugiati ucraini in Italia e in Europa*, edited by Joselle Dagnes and Massimiliano Demata, and published in 2024. The project brought together researchers from different disciplines across the UNITA alliance (Linguistics, Political Science, Sociology) working on democratic experiments across Europe and answered the need for a comprehensive critical approach to the complex social, political and linguistic dynamics of immigration and the responses to it within the public sphere of EU countries. The recruited PhD student will be expected to follow up on the project, developing a nuanced and interdisciplinary approach to the political discourse addressing borders.

The PhD student would also further develop the aims and purposes of the UNITA Borders BIP (Blended Intensive Programme), funded by Erasmus and organised within the UNITA alliance. Massimiliano Demata is the academic coordinator of the BIP, while Miguel-Angel Benitez Castro has actively contributed to it by giving lectures and seminars. Now in its third year, UNITA Borders has successfully employed an interdisciplinary approach to the study of borders, drawing scholars and expertise from various disciplines (Geopolitics, Sociology, Geography, Linguistics). It is hoped that the holder of the CHORAL PhD will benefit from, as well as contribute to, the fertile environment generated within UNITA Borders.

The highly original research produced by the PhD student will be published in a monograph. During her/his tenure as a PhD student, the candidate will also be expected to present the results of her/his ongoing research in up to two academic conferences per year.

Estimated schedule

2025-26: collection of corpus of texts and analysis of secondary literature

2026-27: year in Zaragoza: writing up results and analysis

2027-28: year in Turin. Finalisation of the project and viva

