"Brexit Means Brexit!": Investigating the Production of Social Phenomena in Political Discourses

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The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, known as Brexit, is arguably the most important political, social, and economic phenomenon in British post-WWII history. This paper analyses parliamentary debates from December 2018 concerning the European Withdrawal Act, focusing on the epistemic modality of Member of Parliaments' (MP) statements, to investigate the ontology of Brexit. Epistemic modality refers to linguistic devices that allow modification with regards to confidence, truthfulness, and probability, and enables investigation of MPs' commitments. Commitments are a part of their status function declaration, which create institutional reality. Analysis of such commitments permits inference about the institutional reality of Brexit. A video abstract is available at https://youtu.be/90RRWApg0rQ.
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INTRODUCTION

Brexit, the commonly used abbreviation for the United Kingdom's (UK) withdrawal from its European Union (EU) membership, is probably the most important political, social, and economic phenomenon in British post-WWII history. Brexit has been the predominant pivot in British public discourse ever since former Prime Minister David Cameron made the promise that the British people would "have their say" (Cabinet Office 2013) on the question of European membership, if he was returned to power at the 2015 election, and following the 2016 referendum in which the "Leave" campaign[1] won by a 52% to 48% margin. Brexit has not only created a deep division in British society but has also raised severe issues for the

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UK's constitutional integrity (Greer 2017; Hazell and Renwick 2016; Keating 2017), revealing "arguably the second major failure of statecraft by the British political class this century, following the UK's participation in the 2003 Iraq invasion" (Lees 2020:n.p.).

Despite the somewhat self-explanatory meaning of Brexit as a composition of "Britain" and "exit," referring to the UK's renunciation of its EU membership, there were, and are, various technical, scholarly, and political interpretations of the meaning of the term, as well as its implementation, ranging from the recognition of the complexities of leaving a political and economic project such as the EU (Park and Reilly 2018; Polak 2017; Richards, Heath, and Carl 2018) to simple slogans such as "Brexit means Brexit" (Allen 2018). Yet, even in the context of ambiguity and vagueness around the term's meaning and implementation, it appears that politicians, sometimes right from the start, and sometimes during the political processes surrounding Brexit, took a specific stance; one was either a *leaver*, supporting Brexit, although not necessarily the way the withdrawal was negotiated by the government, or one was a *remainer*, opposing Brexit. Very few public figures remained neutral and politicians across all parties committed themselves publicly to one or the other side of the political argument, declaring themselves in parliamentary debates and elsewhere.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the contribution of Members of Parliament (MPs) to parliamentary debates with a focus on those linguistic devices that allow modification to one's utterances with regards to confidence, truthfulness, and probability, in order to investigate their commitment to Brexit and how its meaning is produced through the interactions of these MPs. The specific focus here is on parliamentary debates from December 4–11, 2018, concerning the European Withdrawal Act, from here on referred to as "the corpus," which led Prime Minister Theresa May to cancel the vote on the Withdrawal Agreement and seek a further extension for negotiations with the EU. The interactionist framework here relies on Searle's (2008) deontologies to justify the focus on epistemic modality for understanding the institutional reality of Brexit via the importance that commitment poses for status functions and institutional facts.

In the next section I briefly explore the nature of political discourses, the context of the Brexit debates, and the literature on epistemic modality and deontologies, before I move into the analysis of the corpus in the following third section, which outlines a short timeline of events and provides some methodological clarifications. In the fourth section I present a brief summary of the main theoretical and methodological implications and future contributions to other areas, referring to Searle's (2008) deontologies and institutional reality. In the final section I offer some conclusions following the findings, which suggest that members of the UK Parliament are committed to the notion of "*the will of the people*," and that they assert authority over their propositions, while hedging and mitigation of utterances are rather rare.

POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND EPISTEMIC MODALITY

Producers of Political Discourses

Typically, the production of political discourse is divided into three domains: political elites, the media, and civil society, although sometimes these can be amalgamated. Influenced by the early work of van Dijk (1997), discourse analysis often focusses on speeches by political elites, that is, political actors "carrying out a political action (e.g., to govern, legislate, protest or vote) in an institutional context of communication (e.g., parliamentary debates, public speeches, official addresses)" (Randour, Perrez, and Reuchamps 2020:429). Political discourse produced by media actors, that is, "discourses produced by journalists or editorial leaders (including op-ed articles)," and civil society actors, that is, "discourse produced by actors from the civil society, in the broad sense of the term (i.e., citizens, social movements, experts, scholars and religious leaders)" (Randour, Perrez, and Reuchamps 2020:434–435), usually add valuable insights. As such, there is a wide range of data available; for instance speeches (Hardjanto and Mazia 2019; Wodak and Boukala 2015), parliamentary debates (Cheng 2019; Simon-Vandenbergen 1997, 2008; Vuković 2014a, 2014b),

> diplomatic condolences (Fenton-Smith 2007), press articles (Musolff 2017), campaign posters (Jones 2014), tweets (Kreis 2017), citizen forums (Perrez and Reuchamps 2012, 2015) and graffiti (Hanauer 2011). (Randour, Perrez, and Reuchamps 2020:429)

While all these domains and sources of data would be interesting for a comprehensive analysis of Brexit, the aim of this paper limits itself to the domain of political elites in parliamentary debates. Furthermore, following Vuković (2014a:39), where "[p]arliamentary debate has been described as a prototypical instance of deliberative genre," I agree that investigating "the degrees to which the MPs are certain of what they are proposing, is not only logical but, possibly, one of the principal pragmatic topics to be investigated within this type of discourse." Furthermore, I believe that this analysis may also allow us to make inferences about the institutional reality of Brexit.

Epistemic Modality

Epistemic modality refers to linguistic devices that allow the modification of one's utterances with regards to confidence, truthfulness, and probability. In other words, epistemic modality "refers to the degree of the speaker's certainty that what s/he is saying is true" (Fairclough 2006:29; Vuković 2014a). In the English language, a number of both strong and weak verbs, adjectives, adverbs, adjuncts, and nouns can be used to express or support commitment to a proposition (see Appendices A and B). However, modal verbs and adverbs are more predominantly used (Biber and Quirk 1999; Carter and McCarthy 2006; Hoye and Zdrenghea 1995; Vuković 2014a). While this convention can be understood as scalar in nature, that is, devices can

be used on their own or in combination that allows interpretation of a weak or strong commitment to the truth of the proposition, the scale itself remains a matter of debate (Collins 2015; Cornillie 2008; Huddleston and Pullum 2002; Nuyts 2006; Simon-Vandenbergen 1997). However, the evaluation of the level of a speaker's commitment by reference to the linguistic devices used, alongside their specific position within the expressed sentences, is intuitive. Let us consider, for instance, the following two examples:

 i. I **know** X
ii. I **suppose** X.

Based on the use of modal verbs in these two examples, we would attest a higher level of certainty in (i) in comparison to (ii) and would say the speaker of (i) is more certain about what they are saying.

We must be careful, though, with some modal verbs and their expression. According to Hooper (1975; cited in Palmer 1986:142),

> the verb *believe* states non-factivity with weak assertiveness, and is a form of reports of modal judgments. Being non-factive and weak assertive, *believe* shows a degree of engagement in between low and high.

However, Fetzer (2008:390) argues that *I/we believe* "signifies boosted epistemic commitment" in political discourses, inviting the listeners to adopt one's position. As shown in the analysis of the corpus below, our findings certainly support Fetzer's (2008) argument about the function of *I believe* here.

In addition, Simon-Vandenbergen (2000) provides a comprehensive analysis of *I think* in political discourse. While *I think* can be classified as a strong modal marker of certainty in political discourse (Vuković 2014a), in ordinary language usage it is usually understood as a modal adjunct that establishes the extent to which the speaker views the action or state as (im)probable. Simon-Vandenbergen also emphasizes that in parliamentary debates *I think*

> does not serve the purpose of qualifying the truth of the proposition (i.e. it is not substitutable by probably) but is used primarily to focus on the speaker's personal position with regard to value judgements and proposals regarding action to be taken. (2000:53)

Hence, *I think* has a dual nature, "one to hedge [probability] and the other to express certainty" (Vuković 2014a:45). According to Vuković (2014a) the two uses can be differentiated by looking at the phonological characteristics of the utterances, that is, where, and how, *I think* is situated within the expression. In political discourses it is generally the latter that is more predominant.

Language and Social Ontology

I base my interactionist framework for this research on Searle (2008:449), who categorizes linguistic commitments under "deontologies," which are "a class of

phenomena by which humans are bound together with special kinds of reason for action." These deontologies have

> a crucial logical property … essential for the creation of social and institutional reality: the creation of a deontology of commitments, as well as rights, duties, obligations, etc., creates desire independent reasons for action. Searle (2008:449)

Furthermore, language is essential in the creation of institutional reality via status function declarations. Searle (2008) defines these as declarations of status functions Y, which are essential in the creation of institutional facts where an object (X) is assigned a status function (Y) in a context (C), so X counts as Y in C. For example, physical bills (X) count as money (Y) in the United States (C). Institutional reality is then created by representing the status function declarations as existing; a corporation, for instance, is brought into existence by a (written) declaration.

Following Searle (2008), I argue that the institutional reality of Brexit is constructed through political discourses in the UK Parliament through the interactions of the present MPs (Fairclough 2006). The commitments towards Brexit expressed by them lead to actions and specific status function declarations, partially in the form of legislation, which ultimately result in creating the institutional reality of Brexit. However, as Searle (2008) recognizes, there are different kinds of commitments within the political discourse that are persuasive in nature (Vuković 2014a) and, thus, contain relativistic truth claims. Politicians also employ different linguistic devices to communicate their commitment to the statements they make. Therefore, a careful reading of the epistemic markers is essential to the understanding of how committed MPs were, and to what.

ANALYSIS OF PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

A Timeline and Methodological Clarifications

The parliamentary sessions December 4–12, 2018, were a decisive phase in the development of the UK's domestic Brexit legislation. Six hundred and sixteen days after the UK government triggered Article 50 of TFEU,[2] which started the legal process of the UK leaving the EU, then Prime Minster (PM) Theresa May presented the UK parliament with a revised Withdrawal Agreement, which was first published on November 14 of the same year. While there were a good number of parliamentary Brexit debates in the years prior, including on the approach to the negotiations, I see the December 2018 debates as particular interesting and chose them for analysis for the following two reasons. First, PM May presented the most detailed Withdrawal Agreement text to date, with the EU firmly rejecting significant renegotiations at that point. In legal and economics terms, the text most clearly outlined the British exit conditions and gave a glimpse of the future relationship between the UK and the EU.

Second, in the entire year of 2018, PM May experienced significant backlash for the UK Backstop proposed in her protocol; a policy solution that would keep the UK

within the EU Customs Union until a solution for the Northern Irish border situation was found, and with exit conditions to be negotiated by both parties involved. Ardent Brexiteers were against this solution, arguing the backstop would give the EU extraordinary power over the UK, effectively curtailing its sovereignty, and declared that a unilateral exit was not possible under the proposed text. This backlash resulted in the resignation of no less than 14 cabinet ministers between July and November 2018. Consequently, PM May attempted to push her Withdrawal Agreement through parliament on December 4, without allowing Parliament time to properly discuss and scrutinize the text. What followed was a decisive vote on the same day, where the government was found in contempt of Parliament, for the first time in British history, over failing to present legal advice on the proposed Withdrawal Agreement. Parliament forced the government to publicize the advice. Subsequent votes also forced the government to allow for an extended period of parliamentary sessions between December 5 and December 11 for further discussion and to bring in amendments, before planning to finally vote on December 11. These debates were probably the most substantive discussions on any Withdrawal Agreement, and Brexit itself, we had ever seen.[3] The frontpage of the newspaper *Daily Mirror* on December 5, 2018 summarized this extraordinary episode in British parliamentary history succinctly: "63 Minutes of Mayhem (2018)." Involved in these debates were also a number of key topics related to the Withdrawal Agreement, including the proposed solution to the Irish border problem (known as the "backstop"), the 2016 referendum results, a second referendum and, at a later stage, the Attorney General's legal advice (Cox 2018).

Eventually, facing a significant defeat in Parliament, PM May canceled the vote scheduled for December 11 on the day before, December 10, with the promise to return to EU negotiation partners for further concessions and improvements on the deal. Following further pressure from both her own backbenchers and the opposition parties, a first vote on her deal was scheduled for January 15, 2019. This resulted in a historic loss (432 — against versus 202 — for), followed by two further lost votes in March of the same year. The loss in confidence and support, even from her own party, led Theresa May to resign in early May 2019 (BBC 2019; Kuensberg 2019). Arguably, then, the debates during December 4–12, 2018, mark the beginning of the end of Theresa May's premiership (Table 1).

For the analysis I used a reflexive, semantic, analytical approach, which shifted between deductive and inductive modes (Braun and Clarke 2021, 2022; Bryne 2021), recognizing the importance of my expertise as well as my own lived experiences as an EU immigrant to the UK for the interpretation of the data. I began with the deductive approach, using the weak and strong epistemic markers from the literature (Simon-Vandenbergen 1997, 2000; Vuković 2014a, 2014b; see Appendices A–D) to analyze the full dataset qualitatively and quantitatively. This was especially important in the case of *I think*, both to understand and correctly conceptualize its use as hedge or authoritative deliberation by looking at phonological characteristics in the utterance (Vuković 2014a; see Table 4). Hedging probability is usually identified through *I think* being "additionally embedded in the utterance," for instance in a

TABLE 1. Presents the First Details of the Corpus, which are the Basis for the Quantitative Analysis

Transcripts	Date	Source	Total Word Count[a]
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-04	December 4, 2018	(Hansard HC 2018a)	66,244
Privilege (Withdrawal Agreement Legal Advice) 2018-12-04	December 4, 2018	(Hansard HC 2018b)	32,312
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-05	December 5, 2018	(Hansard HC 2018c)	73,272
EU Exit_ Article 502,018-12-10	December 10, 2018	(Hansard HC 2018d)	8037
Exiting the European Union_ Meaningful Vote 2018-12-11	December 11, 2018	(Hansard HC 2018e)	28,287
Total			208, 152

[a] The total word count includes the names of MPs, their party membership, and the name of their constituency.

subclause, whereas for expressing certainty and authority it is "strongly interwoven in the utterance" (Vuković 2014a:46). The following two examples demonstrate this:

1. PM MAY (CON): As the hon. Gentleman knows full well, *I think*, the political declaration and the security section of that political declaration go well beyond any security arrangement that the European Union has with any other country (Interruption).
2. PM MAY (CON): I do, indeed, agree with my hon. Friend. *I think* a second referendum would exacerbate division in our country and would not bring our country back together again. (Hansard HC 2018a)

As we can see in (1), PM May uses *I think* within a subclause of the utterance in her answer to Stephen Doughty (LAB) to mitigate her assessment of his knowledge. I had to pay particular attention to the two commas here. In (2) she asserts authority of the social impact of a second referendum by putting *I think* at the beginning of the utterance.

In addition, I used an inductive approach to code relevant passages in the corpus to provide more context, allowing the identification of further patterns and codes, such as the populist "the will of the people." "The will of the Scottish people" and party membership, are complementarily used with the authoritative deliberations to create a distinctive notion of the populist mantra. I then used these additional codes in combination with Searle's (2008) deontologies to form this paper's central arguments pertaining to the link between MPs' commitments and the institutional reality of Brexit.

Brexit as "The Will of the People"

By invoking Mudde's (2004:543) and Kaltwasser and Mudde (2012) definition of populism, which "*considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous*

TABLE 2. Corpus Details and References to "the Will of the People" During Parliamentary Brexit Debates, December 4–12, 2018

Transcripts	Total Word Count	References to the "the Will of the People"	Frequency of Occurrences Per 1000 Words
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018a)	66,244	39	0.59
Privilege (Withdrawal Agreement Legal Advice) 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018b)	32,312	1	0.03
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-05 (Hansard HC 2018c)	73,272	61	0.83
EU Exit_ Article 50 2018-12-10 (Hansard HC 2018d)	8037	3	0.37
Exiting the European Union_ Meaningful Vote 2018-12-11 (Hansard HC 2018e)	28,287	16	0.57
Total	208, 152	120	0.58

and antagonistic groups" (e.g. Leavers versus Remainers or the metropolitan elite versus the people) and "*which argues that politics should be an expression of the* volonté générale *(general will) of the people*" (original in italics), I will demonstrate from the inductive analysis that Brexit is ultimately an expression of a populist shift in UK politics and public discourse.

My analysis of the transcripts shows that MPs, both in their prepared speeches, as well as in their more ad-hoc answers to questions and comments, are strongly committed to the notion that the "the will of the people" must be adhered to. Within the corpus, references to the "the will of the people" are made a total of 120 times, dividable into five central codes: (1) to honor the 2016 referendum results, (2) for the sake of democracy, (3) to justify a second referendum, (4) to reject the Withdrawal Agreement, and (5) to make specific reference to the Scottish people (see Appendix C for examples). Table 2 summarizes the corpus data on this reference:

A closer look at the epistemic markers in the corpus suggests that these populist notions are genuine convictions held by MPs. For instance, PM May makes several direct references to "the will of the people" with signifiers showing commitment in her opening statements and answers to questions on December 4:

3. MAY (CON): The referendum was a vote to bring our EU membership to an end and to create a new role for our country in the world. To deliver on that vote, *we need to* deliver a Brexit that respects the decision of the British people (…)
4. MAY (CON): *I believe* it is important that we respect the views of those who voted leave and deliver Brexit (…)
5. MAY (CON): The Electoral Commission still says it believes that it was a fair poll, and *I believe* that we should abide by the result of that poll and deliver for the people of this country. (Hansard HC 2018a)

In (3) PM May uses the strong modal verb *need to* in expressing the necessity for the government to deliver, whereas in (4) and (5) she uses *I believe*, including employing *should* on one occasion as a further epistemic signifier, to boost her epistemic commitment to the proposition that "the will of the people" needs to be honored rather than limiting assertiveness here (Fetzer 2008).

Another example is current Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who is not only using strong modal verbs to make appeals to "the will of the people," but also uses *I believe* and *I think* to express high commitment (Fetzer 2008) and to signal authoritative deliberation and self-confidence in his speech, specifically with the latter *I think* (Simon-Vandenbergen 2000; Vuković 2014a):

6. JOHNSON (CON): *I simply think* that membership is no longer right for the UK. That was what *I campaigned* on, and *I think* the British people were completely right.
7. JOHNSON (CON): We *should* not pretend, after two years of wasted negotiations, that it is going to be easy, but it is the only option that delivers on the "the will of the people" and also, *I believe*, maintains our democratic self-respect as a country.
8. JOHNSON (CON): We *must* understand that when people voted to leave in 2016, they voted for change. They did not vote for an endless transition or a thinly disguised version of the status quo: they voted for freedom, independence and a better Britain and for a country where politicians actually listen to what the people say. (Hansard HC 2018a)

Johnson's use of *I think*, the occurrence of the epistemic signifiers *should* and *must* in (6) and (7) expressing medium to strong obligations, the appeal to "the will of the people," and the self-referential *I campaigned*, in total, show him strongly committing himself to a very particular position against those who would not adhere to his interpretation of the results. This ultimately serves the populist "normative distinction between 'the elite' and 'the people'" (Mudde 2004:544) that he and other pro-Brexit parliamentarians promoted in parliament and in public. Similar explicit and implicit references to "the will of the people," including signifiers of commitment, can be found elsewhere in the corpus (see Appendix D) which further supports the conclusion that *I believe* is used to boost epistemic commitment.

Authoritative Deliberation and Self-Confidence

While MP Johnson's speeches and answers provide useful examples of authoritative deliberation and self-confidence — he uses it more than any other MP — there are many occurrences of *I think* in the corpus from both government and opposition MPs asserting their authority over various utterances. Table 3 shows the occurrences per 1000 words of *I think* in each of the transcripts and compares it to the occurrences per 1000 words of *I believe*.

TABLE 3. Total Count of Occurrences of *I think* and *I believe* and their Respected Frequency

Transcripts	Occurrences of *I think*	Frequency of Occurrences per 1000 Words	Occurrences of *I believe*	Frequency of Occurrences Per 1000 Words
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018a)	46	0.69	41	0.62
Privilege (Withdrawal Agreement Legal Advice) 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018b)	22	0.68	6	0.19
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-05 (Hansard HC 2018c)	52	0.71	33	0.45
EU Exit_ Article 50 2018-12-10 (Hansard HC 2018d)	3	0.37	0	0.00
Exiting the European Union_ Meaningful Vote 2018-12-11 (Hansard HC 2018e)	17	0.60	7	0.25
Total	**140**	**0.67**	**87**	**0.41**

TABLE 4. Occurrences of *I Think* Used as a Hedge and as Expressions of Certainty

Transcripts	Occurrences of *I think*	Occurrences of *I think* as Hedges	Occurrences of *I think* as Certainty/ Assertion of Authority
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018a)	46 (13)[a]	1	45
Privilege (Withdrawal Agreement: Legal Advice) 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018b)	22 (9)	6	16
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-05 (Hansard HC 2018c)	52 (16)	3	49
EU Exit_ Article 50 2018-12-10 (Hansard HC 2018d)	3 (0)	0	3
Exiting the European Union_ Meaningful Vote 2018-12-11 (Hansard HC 2018e)	17 (5)	0	17
Total	140 (43)	10	130

[a] Figure in brackets show MPs of the opposition parties.

As I already suggested, the phrase *I think* has a dual nature in political discourse, which depends on phonological characteristics of the utterances (Vuković 2014a). My analysis supports Vuković's (2014a) and Simon-Vandenbergen's (1997, 2000) findings that the expression of certainty and assertion of authority are the predominant uses of *I think* (and variations) in political discourse, as shown in Table 4:

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TABLE 5. Occurrences of Common Variations of *I Think*

Transcripts	Occurrences of *I do not think*	Occurrences of *I thought*	Occurrences of *I did not think*
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018a)	5 (2)[a]	1 (1)	0
Privilege (Withdrawal Agreement: Legal Advice) 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018b)	14 (5)	2 (0)	2 (0)
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-05 (Hansard HC 2018c)	11 (6)	3 (1)	0
EU Exit_ Article 50 2018-12-10 (Hansard HC 2018d)	1 (1)	2 (0)	1 (1)
Exiting the European Union_ Meaningful Vote 2018-12-11 (Hansard HC 2018e)	4 (4)	2 (2)	0
Total	**35 (18)**	**10 (4)**	**3 (1)**

[a] Figure in brackets show MPs of the opposition parties.

What is also evident from Tables 4 and 5 is that the MPs supporting the government were much more likely to use *I think*, in both forms/and variations, than MPs on the opposition benches.[4] This suggests that MPs on the government benches were attempting to assert their authority more, and steer discussions in this way. However, this does not mean that the individual cases of members of the opposition asserting authority are in any way weaker. On the contrary, the phonological characteristics of the utterances containing *I think* by members of the opposition strongly suggest that "the speaker is in no doubt at all about the proposition she is asserting" (Holmes 1990:187). Take the following three examples:

9. BLACKFORD (SNP): How many of the 13 Tory MPs from Scotland will stand up with us to defend Scotland's interests? Where are they? *I think we know* the answer from the failure of the Scottish Tory MPs to stand up against a power grab when Westminster voted to take back control from the Scottish Parliament. (Hansard HC 2018a)

10. HENDRY (SNP): *I think* I am justified in saying that it would be right to be greatly concerned by the deal that is on offer. It is a democratic outrage that Scotland is being dragged out of the EU against the people's vote in Scotland, where 62% of people, in all 32 local authority areas, voted to remain. As we have heard, all the parties in the Scottish Parliament, with the exception of the Tories, voted 92 to 29 tonight to reject the deal on offer. (Hansard HC 2018c)

11. BENN (LAB): I will not dissemble, and I will not pretend. *I think* that leaving the European Union is a terrible mistake. It will damage our economy and discourage investment; it will hurt our constituents; it will make it much more difficult to do something about the many reasons why people voted to leave; it will reduce our influence in the world; (…). (Hansard HC 2018a)

What is interesting here are the two examples of members of the Scottish National Party (SNP), who both add the notion of Scottish independence into their assertion of

authority; something that is, unsurprisingly, found quite often among SNP members. In (9), Ian Blackford's rhetorical use of two strong epistemic markers in succession, *I think* and *we know*, shows how he asserts authority over, and gives weight to, the strong commitment not only by him, but in this case a collectivized commitment towards the proposition that Scottish Tory MPs are essentially betraying their own country. Likewise, in (10) Drew Hendry asserts authority over concerns about the government's Withdrawal Agreement, but she adds references to Scottish independence and the notion of the Scottish Tory MPs betrayal here too. Finally, in (11) Hilary Benn can be seen to use qualifiers, that is, rejections of disguise and deception, prior to asserting his authority over the proposition that leaving the EU is a terrible mistake to give even more weight to his assertion. These types of qualifications can be found occasionally in the entire corpus from both sides of the House.

Weak Epistemic Modality

The second part of my analysis is concerned with weak epistemic modality, following Vuković's (2014b:121) definition as "a rhetorical strategy (…) to mean decreasing, diminishing, softening or subtracting from the full strength of the utterance." Considering the previous findings about strong commitments and assertion of authority over statements regarding Brexit and the Withdrawal Agreement, it is illuminating to see where exactly MPs' commitment to their utterances is low and how this affects the production of meaning. In the English language, lowering commitment can be achieved via the use of epistemic verbs and adverbs (see Appendix C for examples). Table 6 indicates the overall occurrences of adverbs and verbs associated with weak epistemic modality:

As we can see from Table 6, the use of weak epistemic verbs is much more frequent than adverbs here, which is consistent with the findings from Vuković (2014b). She further highlights the existence of three categories where commonly used verbs such as *might*, *may*, or *could* (category 1) are mostly used for distancing oneself from estimates or predictions of future events. This is linguistically rather natural, whereas *seem*, *appear* and *looks* are used as substitutes for *to be* and *assume*, *suppose*, *suspect*, and *presume* (category 2). The phrases *(I) would say* and *(I) would argue* are commonly used to replace *think* and *believe* (category 3). However, Table 7 shows the rarity of categories 2 and specifically 3, meaning that hedging and mitigation did not occur that much. Here, Vuković (2014a:137) explains that political discourse generally functions to project a "firm and confident authority and strong personality so as to persuade the electorate." Therefore, more persuasive and authoritative deliberation strategies are preferred over hedging and mitigation ones. In the context of the parliamentary debates around Brexit, this makes sense due to the confrontational nature between supporters and opposers of the Withdrawal Agreement, between Leavers and Remainers, and the government and opposition benches.

What is interesting in the second category is that *seem*, *appear*, and *look* are used to hedge otherwise amplified utterances. This means that MPs use these weak epistemic

TABLE 6. Weak Epistemic Adverbs and Verbs in the Corpus, Based on Selection by Vuković (2014b) (See Appendix C)

Transcripts	Weak Epistemic Adverbs	Frequency of Weak Epistemic Adverbs Per 1000 Words	Occurrences Weak Epistemic Verbs	Frequency of Weak Epistemic Verbs Per 1000 Words
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018a)	40	0.60	232	3.50
Privilege (Withdrawal Agreement Legal Advice) 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018b)	26	0.80	188	5.18
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-05 (Hansard HC 2018c)	45	0.61	282	3.85
EU Exit_ Article 50 2018-12-10 (Hansard HC 2018d)	5	0.62	32	3.98
Exiting the European Union_ Meaningful Vote 2018-12-11 (Hansard HC 2018e)	13	0.46	94	3.32
Total	**129**	**0.62**	**828**	**3.98**

verbs to soften their commitment to the truth of the utterance while simultaneously using epistemic emphasizers (see Appendix A) or other strong epistemic vocabulary. For example, the following quote by MP Vernon Coaker shows how he uses the hedge *it seems* in combination with what appears to be an epistemically very strong utterance, *a catastrophic failure of leadership*:

12. COAKER (LAB): It is a privilege to speak in the debate. I was reflecting, as I think the country is, on how we arrived at this point. *It seems* that a catastrophic failure of leadership has brought us to within a few weeks of when we are supposed to leave the European Union without us having any clear plan for what that should look like. (Hansard HC 2018c)

This combination of hedging and epistemically strong vocabulary may make sense in the context of the persuasive nature of political discourse. By applying a hedge to soften the commitment to the truth of utterances, it can be interpreted as becoming more credible than if it was uttered with a strong epistemic verb or with authoritative deliberation.

DISCUSSION

The reflexive, semantic analysis of epistemic modality I used has revealed several interesting findings around language use, commitment, authoritative deliberation, the production of meaning, and lack of hedging and mitigation among UK MPs

TABLE 7. Occurrences of Vuković's (2014b) Three Categories of Weak Epistemic Verbs

Transcripts	Occurrences of *might*, *may*, *could*	Occurrences of *seem*, *appear*, *looks*, *suggest*	Occurrences of *assume*, *suppose*, *suspect*, *presume*, *(I) would say*, *(I) would argue*
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018a)	166	90	8
Privilege (Withdrawal Agreement Legal Advice) 2018-12-04 (Hansard HC 2018b)	142	49	12
European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018-12-05 (Hansard HC 2018c)	208	40	12
EU Exit_ Article 50 2018-12-10 (Hansard HC 2018d)	24	5	0
Exiting the European Union_ Meaningful Vote 2018-12-11 (Hansard HC 2018e)	73	34	6
Total	**613**	**218**	**38**

TABLE 8. Comparison between Strong and Weak Epistemic Markers from Vuković (2014a, 2014b) and the Corpus

Strong and weak epistemic markers	Frequency in Vuković (2014a, 2014b) (per 1000 words)	Frequency in corpus (per 1000 words)
I (do not) think, I thought, I did not think	2.09	0.90
I believe	0.44	0.41
Weak epistemic verbs and phrases (see Table 7 and Appendix C)	2.07	4.17

during the December 2018 parliamentary Brexit debates. The context of these debates compels us to be careful in the interpretation but, nonetheless, there are some appealing implications here.

First, I have compared my findings with existing literature, specifically Vuković's (2014a, 2014b) analysis of strong and weak epistemic markers in a UK parliamentary budget debate in 2010, which has a length of 61,255 words. In Table 8 I present a side-by-side comparison of key indictors regarding authoritative deliberation and self -confidence between both corpuses where possible:

What is striking to notice here is the higher frequency of assertion of authority via the use of *I think* and its variations by MPs in Vuković corpus (2014a, 2014b)

in comparison to ours. On the other hand, the use of *I believe*, which she associates with high levels of commitments, is quite similar between both corpuses. In addition, I find a much higher frequency of weak epistemic verbs and phrases per 1000 words in my corpus.

Both differences may be explained by the nature of the debates. I speculate that MPs are generally more comfortable and knowledgeable in debating issues around the public budget than the specific complexities of Brexit and PM May's Withdrawal Agreement. The debates about the government budget are annual occurrences and, as Vuković (2014a:40) remarks, "budget debates in the UK are considered to be the most important debates in the House," allowing specifically seasoned MPs to gain high levels of confidence and expertise in this topic. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that MPs assert more authority within these debates than in the case of the Brexit debates.

The Brexit debates, in comparison, were distinctive and relatively exceptional, requiring a high level of expertise in various areas such as international trade, international law, and domestic law. In addition, the more frequent use of weak epistemic markers can be linked to the fact that the impact of Brexit had yet to happen. MPs were debating issues of an uncertain future due to the legal and economic complexities of exiting the EU. Thus, we see more frequent use of words such as *might*, *may*, or *could* simply because MPs were talking about an unclear future. As a consequence, I find that MPs were overall less confident in asserting authority over the topics debated at that time.

Second, I have shown that the references to "the will of the people," which can be understood as a characteristic of a populism (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2012; Mudde 2004), represent strong, if not even genuine, commitments on the side of the participating MPs, independent of their party membership. By looking at the use of strong modal verbs and other epistemic signifiers, I suggest a high level of authenticity in these commitments. While there is no attempt made by MPs to clearly define the meaning of this phrase, politicians seem to locate the source of their responsibility to deliver Brexit in the 2016 referendum result, which here serves as an expression of "the will of the people." I conclude that, in light of the above-mentioned use of weak epistemic verbs to account for the uncertain future legal and economic impacts of Brexit, politicians needed something they could confidently communicate throughout these debates and used the populist notion of "the will of the people" to do so.

Moreover, we have remarked that in these instances I find a lack of hedging and mitigation in the corpus, which we see because of the function of political discourse as a projection of "firm and confident authority and strong personality so as to persuade the electorate" (Vuković 2014a:137). This means that the deontology of "the will of the people" is consistently being extended. Hence, within the debates of the corpus and beyond, we can observe an attempt by MPs to create the initial existence and maintenance of the continued existence of "the will of the people" as part of the institutional reality of Brexit (Searle 2008). This allows them to assert

authority over a topic with which they are unfamiliar with, which contains high levels of uncertainty, and for which they may lack sufficient expertise. Thus, "the will of the people" is indeed, at least partially, defining the meaning of Brexit, even if there the former lacks a clear definition and has little to no empirical basis to support this link.

This institutional reality is, of course, not without issues. As Weale (2018:x) warns:

> It begins by equating the 'the will of the people' with the outcome of the referendum. It goes on to equate government policy with the referendum result. It ends up by equating government policy with the 'the will of the people'. (…) One people; one will; one party state.

Whether the UK is on the way to becoming a one-party state is, of course, another question, but language has historically played an important part in the shaping of meaning and politics. The analysis here shows that MPs, and not only those from the Conservative Party, used epistemic modality to allow "the will of the people" to become, at least in part, the institutional reality of Brexit. This is also in line with literature identifying a wider trend of populist tendencies in British politics that had already occurred but was certainly more prevalent after the 2016 referendum (Alexandre-Collier 2015, 2022; Baldini, Bressanelli, and Gianfreda 2020; Browning 2019;).

In a similar vein, but somewhat less successful, is the attempt by members of the SNP to create another institutional reality of Brexit, namely the notion that Brexit is *against the will of the Scottish people* and that the Scottish conservatives are traitors to the Scottish people. These are quite strong propositions, which are presented with strong epistemic markers. However, one likely reason as to why those propositions were not as successful in creating and maintaining the intended aspects of the institutional reality of Brexit is that the MPs of the SNP in the UK Parliament were relatively few (35 SNP MPs in 2018), and in the opposition. Thus, they were not in the position within the discourses to establish and maintain this meaning.

Finally, with the application of Searle's (2008) deontologies and his wider social ontology for the interactionist framework, my analysis of the way politicians use language, specifically those linguistic devices to communicate commitment and assert authority, allows me to make inferences about aspects of the institutional reality of political phenomena such as Brexit. Although these institutional realities are informed from more than just parliamentary debates, I argue that MPs' commitments, which translate into legislation, solidify the institutional realities of these phenomena. Therefore, the applied methodology of this paper can be extended to various other political and nonpolitical discourses, and in different languages, to shed light on the production and maintenance of the institutional realities of any social phenomena, and to function ultimately as a methodology for emergent micro–macro relationships between social actors and institutions.

Finally, I can envision two further future opportunities for this reflexive, semantic analysis of parliamentary debates to extend the interactionist framework used here: to consider the notion of linguistic performativity in these debates, since the function of political discourse is to project a "firm and confident authority and strong personality so as to persuade the electorate" (Vuković 2014a:137); and/or to look at the "concept of epistemic positioning to theorize the relationship between identity-based epistemic judgements and the reproduction of social inequalities, including those of gender and ethnicity/race" in political discourses (Bacevic 2021:1). In the end, (political) language, I believe, is a key player in the shaping of political and social reality.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have analyzed epistemic modality in political discourse, with specific focus on the December 2018 UK parliamentary debates on Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement. I have established links to the institutional reality of Brexit. The main findings suggest that members of the British Parliament were highly committed to the notion of "the will of the people," without ever properly defining the phrase. However, they predominately asserted authority on this notion when debating in the House, whereas hedging and mitigation strategies were not that common. While I have pointed to the contextual nature of the Brexit debates, these findings are in line with existing literature (Vuković 2014a, 2014b). This further suggests that politicians were actively and deliberately trying to shape the meaning and institutional reality of Brexit in a Searlean (2008) sense. Therefore, political discourses and the use of language play an important role in shaping the ontology of political phenomena, not only with regards Brexit, where we can observe populist tendencies to reshape political discourse, but in the far wider contexts of generating and maintaining institutional realities. Thus, I believe the methodological approach of this paper to be applicable and beneficial in various contexts at the intersection of social ontology, political theory, interactionism, and linguistics.

APPENDIX A: WORD TYPES USED FOR ANALYSIS

Word type	Examples	Meaning/Expression	Reference
Modal verbs	must (not) man (not) could (not) may (not) might (not) need to should/ought to had better be bound to	A modal verb is a type of verb that is used to indicate modality — that is: likelihood, ability, permission, request, capacity, suggestions, order, obligation, or advice.	(Halliday 1970; Vuković 2014a, 2014b)
Other modal verbs	I think I know I believe I guess I mean I suppose I presume	These verbs in first person singular or plural can be used to scale the commitment of the speaker towards the statement.	(Fetzer 2008; Simon-Vandenbergen 2000; Vuković 2014a, 2014b)
Emphasisers	of course actually certainly indeed really simply obviously clearly frankly surely inevitably honestly literally in fact no doubt	These express "the semantic role of modality which have a reinforcing effect on the truth value of the clause of part of the clause to which they apply".	(Quirk, Greenbaum, and Crystal 1985; Vuković 2014a)
Epistemic nouns	fact confidence argument claim evidence truth knowledge certainty belief assertion judgment lie proof	Nouns used to modify "the utterance in the sense of expressing confidence, truthfulness and probability".	(Halliday 1970; Vuković 2014a:38; 2014b)

APPENDIX A: CONTINUED.

Word type	Examples	Meaning/Expression	Reference
Evaluative adjectives	good important incredible great awesome amazing bad unimportant excellent fantastic perfect amazing outstanding wonderful	"the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or proposition"	(Hunston and Thompson 2001:5)
Degree nouns	possibility chance likelihood the fact nonsense	Nouns expressing the state of degree of truth of statements	(Vuković 2014a)
Degree adjectives	completely relatively somewhat a bit a little totally quite perfectly way	"Now adjectives can be classified into two main types, the nondegree and the degree adjectives. Nondegree or nongradable adjectives do not take degree modifiers (e.g., wooden), while degree or gradable adjectives do. Which degree modifiers they take, depends, however, on the sub-class they belong to. Gradable adjectives are again of two types, those associated with a definite boundary, or totality (such as identical) and those associated with a scale (such as long). The totality adjectives tend to take totality premodifiers (completely/almost identical), the scalar ones tend to take scalar premodifiers (very/rather long)."	(Simon-Vandenbergen 2008: 1533)

APPENDIX B: MODAL ADJUNCTS (TIMUÇIN 2010:113)

Type	Meaning	Examples
polarity	assertion	no, yes, not, so
probability	How likely?	probably, possibly, certainly, perhaps, maybe
usuality	How often?	usually, sometimes, always, never, ever, often, rarely
typicality	How typical?	occasionally, generally, regularly, for the most part
obviousness	How obvious?	of course, surely, obviously, clearly
readiness	How ready?	willingly, readily, gladly, certainly, easily
obligation	How certain?	definitely, absolutely, possibly, at all costs, by all means
opinion	I think	in my opinion, personally, to my mind
admission	I admit	frankly, to be honest, to tell you the truth
persuasion	I assure you	honestly, really, believe me, seriously
entreaty	I request you	please, kindly
presumption	I presume	evidently, apparently, no doubt, presumably
desirability	How desirable?	unfortunately, fortunately, to my delight, to my distress, regrettably, hopefully
reservation	How reliable?	at first, tentatively, provisionally, looking back at
validation	How valid?	broadly speaking, in general, on the whole, strictly speaking, in principle
evaluation	How sensible?	wisely, unwisely, understandably, mistakenly, foolishly
prediction	How expected?	to my surprise, surprisingly, as expected, by chance
temporarily	How frequent?	yet, still, already, soon, just
intensity		just, simply, merely, only, even, actually, really, in fact
degree		quiet, almost, nearly, scarcely, hardly, absolutely, totally, utterly, entirely, completely,

APPENDIX C: EXAMPLES OF WEAK EPISTEMIC VERBS AND ADVERBS (VUKOVIĆ 2014B)

Weak Epistemic Adverbs	Weak Epistemic Verbs
conceivably	might
maybe	may
possibly	seem
potentially	suggest
hypothetically	could
presumptively	(I) would say
allegedly	assume
reportedly	suppose
doubtfully	look
supposedly	(I) would argue
indeterminately	suspect
ostensibly	presume
questionably	appear
suspiciously	tend
seemingly	
vaguely	
obscurely	
ambiguously	
indefinitely	
purportedly	
perhaps	
professedly	
unclearly	
speciously	
outwardly	
supposedly	
tentatively	
hesitantly	
uncertainly	
imaginably	
assumably	
arguably	
by allegation	
to my knowledge	
to all appearances	
on the face of it	

APPENDIX D: FURTHER EXEMPLARY REFERENCES TO "THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE" BY MPS:

1. SOURBY (CON); December 4, 2018): I will not vote for this deal on any other basis than it goes to the people for their approval.
2. LORD (CON; December 4, 2018): That was the mandate and that is what the people want us to see through.
3. UMUNNA (LAB; December 5, 2018): *I do not believe* that they represent the will of this House or the will of our country, which is why we have to give this issue back to the people with the option to keep our current deal a far superior arrangement.
4. REEVES (LAB; December 5, 2018): *I do not believe* that anyone voted in the referendum to be worse off or less secure. The people should be given a voice again.
5. HENDRY (SNP; December 5, 2018): It is a democratic outrage that Scotland is being dragged out of the EU against the people's vote in Scotland, where 62% of people, in all 32 local authority areas, voted to remain.
6. PM MAY (CON; December 12, 2018): It is important that we deliver on Brexit for the people of this country. *I believe* that we should do that with a good deal with the European Union, and *I believe* that that is what we have negotiated. (Hansard HC 2018a, 2018c, 2018f)

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NOTES

1. Please note that the Leave campaign was not a homogeneous, organized campaign but rather consisted of various factors such as VoteLeave, Leave.EU, and several other smaller, independent politicians and campaigners.
2. The Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union.
3. While Boris Johnson also faced opposition to his re-negotiated Withdrawal Agreement in late summer of 2019, his snap election in December of that year, the large majority won by the Tory party, and the whip removal from critical Tory MPs (Bienkov 2019) arguably allowed him to avoid the same level of scrutiny for his Withdrawal Agreement.

4. This does not necessarily mean that distribution of the use of *I think*, in both forms, is equally clear between Leavers and Remainers, as we find Remainers on the government side (such as Kenneth Clark) and Leavers on the opposition benches (such as Kate Hoey, when she was still an MP).

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