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Chris Heaton-Harris MP
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Dear Mr Heaton-Harris,

Request for Information on the Teaching of Brexit

Thank you for your most kind invitation to share details of my teaching as it applies to Brexit. As a linguist I am interested in many aspects of the topic, and I share my thoughts freely with my students; and, indeed, now with you.

The process of leaving the EU has generated many questions about parliamentary democracy, establishing consensus, and what it means to represent; I hope that other academics will be able to address those issues, my own contribution is about some aspects of the language used during the event.

For instance, the word Brexit itself carries a wealth of subconsciously-intended meaning. As a blending of 'British' and 'exit', it is intended to imply a level of unity in the nation which facts belie (I use the word in the sense of "show to be false"). Politically, the term 'Britain' excludes Northern Ireland, one of the stumbling blocks to the negotiation of the clean exit promised to us by the Brexiteers during the referendum (a fact which makes the Conservative government's reliance on the DUP even more ironic). So, as a marker of national unity, Brexit is already a misleading term.

The use of the word 'exit' is also interesting: places of mass attendance have exits, specially designated doors through which the public can flee to avoid a serious problem inside the venue. In normal parlance, when an individual or a small part of an audience departs a venue without ending the show they 'leave' or 'go out'. 'Exit' tends to be reserved for mass departures which end the event being attended. It has connotations of abandoning, which 27 other EU member nations clearly have no intention of doing, despite the rather strange hope of some Brexiteers that "après nous, le deluge" (French is, of course, one of the recognised languages of the British Isles, so I'm sure you have no problems with its use).

From this we can see that the metamessages of the word Brexit include a mistaken geographic definition of who is leaving and a mistaken idea of what leaving means. Adding the suffix '-eer' says a lot about the self-image of the supporters of Brexit. It implies that they see themselves as making some kind of challenge to the order of the state (as in buccaneer, privateer, or – in the form Alexandre Dumas describes them – musketeer). It is a suffix which is quite revealing about the subconscious approach to democracy ("Brexit means Brexit" means a second, more informed, referendum cannot be allowed to overturn the first) and the likely approach to internationalism (and WTO rules) after Brexit.

Chris, I hope this single example helps you to understand that the subject of Brexit has wide application in academia, and can be used illustratively in many subjects. I would like to thank you and your associates for providing such a rich seam of data to mine.

Yours sincerely,

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