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Jeremy Corbyn according to the BBC: ideological representation and identity construction of the Labour Party leader

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Abstract

There have been many complaints that the BBC coverage of the rise of Jeremy Corbyn has been partial and biased. This paper is part of an interdisciplinary project on the television representation of Jeremy Corbyn that brings together scholars in the disciplines of linguistics (critical discourse analysis), journalism and politics. The paper is a small scale case study examining the coverage of Jeremy Corbyn's speech on the 28th September 2016 after he won the leadership by election for the second time in a year. In the first stage we compared the scripting of the reports for the main national UK TV news programmes and the representation of the Labour leader's identity offered to viewers. In the second, we also evaluate Newsnight, a BBC programme coverage of a slightly different genre, which constructed Corbyn as a particular kind of leader. In addition to the verbal text of the reports, we considered the interplay between the presenter and political correspondent and their tone. This enabled us to broaden our critical discourse analysis to a multimodal investigation and tease out non-textual, nuanced ways of creating partiality. We concluded that some BBC coverage does demonstrate bias and partiality against Corbyn in subtle modes where tone alters the meaning of the script and visuals and the BBC fared badly compared to other mainstream TV news.

Key words: Corbyn, identity representation, speech representation, BBC, impartiality

1. Introduction

This paper is part of a project on the television representation of Jeremy Corbyn that integrates scholars in the disciplines of linguistics (critical discourse analysis), journalism and politics. In line with the spirit of this special issue, the paper uses a multi-disciplinary approach to evaluate whether UK television, and the BBC in particular, has failed in their obligation to report politics impartially. It has been argued that the BBC as the public service provider and still the main and most trusted source of news (Newman et al. 2017) have characterised Jeremy Corbyn in ways that are subtly

diminishing and frame him as a less than capable, unconvincing leader not solely by openly criticising him but also by expressing apparent surprise when he delivers a performance that was generally well received by other commentators (Barber 2015; Mason 2016). In our study therefore we address the crucial issue of identity as representation through the media.

The original idea for the investigation came from the numerous attacks and criticisms levelled against the BBC for its allegedly negative portrayal of the Labour Party leader during his first electoral campaign for the Labour leadership, and again, if less so, during the second. Our case study for this paper focuses on coverage of Jeremy Corbyn's speech to the Labour Party conference in Liverpool after he was re-elected leader for the second time. Following on from the continuing debate on BBC (im)partiality, our investigation uses a comparative approach to ascertain whether the BBC was indeed culpable of a partial portrayal of Jeremy Corbyn as many critics have argued (shown in the following section). Our research questions therefore can be summarised as follows:

- a. Was there an identifiable pattern of unfairness towards Corbyn identifiable within the BBC's coverage?
- b. Is it possible to identify, in terms of the form and subject matter of the reports, more precise indications of how journalistic language can be either more or less evaluative and/or more or less impartial?

A comparative analysis is offered of news reports broadcast by a range of providers (BBC, C4, C5, ITN, Sky) on the same day (September 28th 2016), commenting on Corbyn's speech. These reports, which varied between three to eight minutes, all received prominence as the leader's speech was one of the major news stories of the day. Through the analysis of verbal and non-verbal choices of both the newsreaders and political correspondents on each news channel, we consider whether the BBC reports constructed a particular identity for Corbyn. We employ textual analysis to reveal scripting strategies and refer to relevant elements in the BBC guidelines that regulate the impartiality of the public's most trusted media channel.

However our attention is not solely on the choice of words and the faithfulness or lack of it of the new text to the original anterior one. Criticism of coverage of Corbyn in the news has repeatedly raised the issue of the *tone* of the journalist's delivery as for instance was discussed in a BBC 'accountability' programme *Newswatch* on 24th September 2016. Presented on this occasion by broadcast journalist Samira Ahmed, on BBC1 and the BBC News channel, *Newswatch* collects and responds to viewers' complaints about BBC's alleged misrepresentations and biases in its news reporting. On 24th September 2016, four days before Jeremy Corbyn was confirmed the Labour leader for the second time, Ahmed discussed with a number of viewers how the main public service broadcasting provider had covered Corbyn. She offers a number of examples among which was the case of BBC mentioning that Mr Corbyn's first wife claimed she preferred Owen Smith (his opponent) and would not support the Labour leader because his ideas have not changed since 1975. This is followed by a direct speech report by a viewer: 'That damning verdict, it is alleged, has been urged too often over the airwaves. Your coverage of Corbyn today is the last straw, your absolute bias against him.'

We particularly noted the observations of the last viewer, Kevin Foley, interviewed by presenter Ahmed. Interestingly the question Ahmed puts to her interviewee summarising his and probably other viewers' complaints, refers to the word *tone* that we will discuss in our analysis: 'And you have other concerns too about the *tone* of coverage and also the kind of voices who are commenting on him.'

Disgruntled viewer and Corbyn supporter Kevin Foley complained:

- (1)
Kevin Foley: Well, I mean it is almost as if the mood changes, the **tone** of voice changes, everything seems to change you know, it's Doctor Who time for Corbyn's supporters because no one knows what's gonna happen next. There often it seems that there are twice as many people who are detracting from than there are supporting his position. And the presenters can introduce an element of (.)¹ incredulity when it comes to treating anything Jeremy Corbyn says. So it doesn't come across as even-handed, it comes across as bias.

We picked up the point raised by Kevin Foley on *Newswatch*, articulating a growing concern about tone and expression that has emerged around the reporting of Corbyn's leadership. BBC news teams, in common with other TV news programmes, are very alive to the impartiality guidelines and often when one reads the scripted words of their reports they appear neutral. Yet we note that the tone of the voice can change the meaning of the words. We are interested in 'the contribution not [only] of what was said but of how it was said' (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1568), in other words we try to identify the tone of the report as is realised by such suprasegmental elements as laughter, and also facial expressions in the case of a smirk or a straightforward smile. As for such prosodic features as pitch and intonation these elements project very 'general meanings' and 'there is no claim [...] that one can reconstruct the actual intentions of the speakers, but rather that "plausible" intentions can be reconstructed, given adequate evidence' (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1552). Following Culpeper et al. (2003:1569), therefore tone is viewed here as interpretable only pragmatically in relation to the message and the context in which it is used.

2. The Context

One aspect of the context for this paper is the unprecedented criticism of the BBC's coverage from BBC insiders. For example, former BBC Political Editor Nick Robinson (and now *Today* programme presenter) said how unimpressed he had been with the Corporation's reporting of Corbyn's first leadership bid (Barber 2015) and Sir Michael Lyons, a former Chair of the BBC Trust, claimed that there had been:

some quite extraordinary attacks on the elected leader of the Labour party [...] I can understand why people are worried about whether some of the most senior editorial voices in the BBC have lost their impartiality on this (Mason 2016: online).

Comments like these flooded mainstream and social media during Corbyn's first campaign provoking an atmosphere of distrust vis-à-vis the BBC and to some extent of the media generally. Corbyn has been a much contested figure, which has led to a number of projects monitoring his representation in the mainstream media². Cammaerts et al. (2016) for instance move in a similar direction to our own investigation by identifying the 'delegitimisation of Corbyn' as a political actor from the moment he became a prominent candidate and even more so after he was elected as party leader, with a strong mandate through: 1) 'lack of or distortion of voice'; 2) 'ridicule, scorn and personal attacks'; and 3) 'association, mainly with terrorism.'

The BBC has defended itself from the criticisms in some cases using its own self-appraisal tools (e.g. *Newswatch* based on viewers' comments on BBC News coverage) to gauge its neutrality levels. When attacked, BBC broadcasters point out that they are regulated by the BBC Trust³ and by a strict set of editorial guidelines. On impartiality, the guidelines state (BBC 2017a: online):

The Agreement accompanying the BBC Charter requires us to do all we can to ensure controversial subjects are treated with due impartiality in our news and other output dealing with matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy.

The term *due* means that the impartiality must be adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation and any signposting that may influence that expectation.

As of 1st April 2017 regulation of all UK broadcasters came under Ofcom, which currently regulates all non-BBC UK mainstream UK TV broadcasters. Their guidelines on impartiality for news providers are also strict. (That is one reason why, as yet, the UK does not have an equivalent of the blatantly partisan US TV station Fox News⁴.)

3. Methodology

In this paper, as said earlier, we offer a taster of our broader exploration of the BBC journalistic style by focusing on the reporting of a major speech of the Labour Party leader by a number of broadcast news providers. This speech was well-received in the news media and the choice of a positive news item for our analysis rather than a negative one is deliberate; if the BBC was inherently more critical of Jeremy Corbyn, this would be harder to demonstrate when all reports by TV news programmes across a range of channels were negative.

In line with the spirit of this special issue, in our analysis we follow a CDA approach showing how television has 'the ability to create and impose discourses' (Mayr 2008: 1) and thus shape the social reality to serve the interest of specific parties. As we look at the different representations of Corbyn as a political leader, we focus on a number of elements by which the journalists portray him as a social actor, from the way he is given or deprived of agency to how his actions are portrayed (van Leeuwen 2008) or the words used to appraise him (Martin and White 2005). These elements and others contribute to the semantic constructions of Corbyn's identity for the viewers,

according to a vision of discourse that is intrinsically ‘historical’ (Foucault 1972: 117). We compare one news item on 28th September 2016 in the evening bulletins broadcast by BBC, C4, C5, ITN and Sky. In addition we analyse the BBC editorial programme *Newsnight* in which we identify the criticisms that viewers levelled at this provider in another BBC programme, *Newswatch*. The news reports have been accessed through Box of Broadcasts (BoB), an on demand TV and radio service for education that in most cases provides a rough transcript of the broadcasts. We have carefully edited the original BoB texts according to a loose Jeffersonian system (Jefferson 1984). The legend of symbols is provided below:

(.) indicates a small pause

CAPS indicate a raised voice or higher pitch

\$ indicates laughter

[stands for overlap between two interlocutors

Non-verbal comments are in caps within brackets

Our analysis takes into account the text of the report in the words of the newsreader who sets up - or in the industry vernacular ‘cues’ - the political correspondent’s report. In this case study these include a critical summary and evaluation of Corbyn’s speech. In our analysis we focus on how the original words of the Labour party leader were quoted, summarised or interpreted. To do so we follow the same discourse presentation framework (by Leech and Short (1981 [2007]) and Short et al. (2002)) that Brian Walker and Tatyana Karpenko-Secombe use in their contribution to this special issue. As in that paper therefore, we distinguish between faithful and less faithful or more interpretative ways of reviving an original message for the viewers and thus identify a range of ways of reporting speech, as set out and illustrated in Table 1. These include Direct Speech (DS), Indirect Speech (IS), Free Indirect (FIS) and Free Direct Speech (FDS) when the reported speech is not introduced by a framing verb, Narrator’s Representation of a Speech Act (NRSA) and Narrator’s Report of Voice (NRV) both in different ways interpreting, hence the term ‘representation’, the pragmatic meaning of the original speech or its mode of delivery, respectively. To this, following Piazza (2009), we add Extremely Direct Speech (EDS) when the reporter chooses to embed visual clips of Corbyn speaking.

Direct Speech (DS)	And as Jo said in her maiden speech as an MP "We have far more in common with each other than things that divide us". (Corbyn’s Liverpool speech)
Indirect Speech (IS)	You also said there would be no false promises on migration (Gary Gibbon C4 news)
Free Direct Speech (FDS)	‘You’re only interested in forming and leading a protest group’ (adapted

	from Watts in BBC <i>Newsnight</i>)
Free Indirect Speech (FIS)	He shouted to the conference that we will take on the TORIES! (CAPS indicate raised voice - fabricated)
Narrator's Representation Speech Act (NRSA)	His aid is joking that he's been learning on the job (Nick Watt BBC <i>Newswatch</i>)
Narrator's Represented Voice (NRV)	His supporters sang along his praises (fabricated)
Extremely Direct Speech (EDS)	He is not strong enough. Just not strong enough. (Andy Bell interviewing passers-by on video for C5)

Table 1: Categories of reported speech

As discussed in our introduction, we do not only look at words but attempt a multimodal analysis of tone for the very reason that the term is mentioned clearly in viewers' reactions to television reports of Corbyn. Our focus on tone is firstly an attempt to identify whether, compared with other providers, the BBC journalists express a particular stance that can be perceived as suggestive of bias, and secondly as a way to identify how such tone, if there is one, is realised verbally and non-verbally.

The texts in our case study all involve political editors or correspondents. These are senior specialist journalists, unlike general reporters, that have a dispensation in the editorial structure to allow them, as appointed experts, to express opinions based on their analysis. Over the last two years there has been a marked increase in complaints of a perceived failure by broadcasters, and especially the BBC, in achieving unbiased, impartial and fair reporting, especially in the political realm (Scholsberg 2016). We argue that this paper deals with an important area of research as political communication is increasingly conducted through the media, a process described as 'mediatisation' (Strömbäck 2008). As early as 1995 Blumler and Gurevitch suggested that there had been major changes in political communication and that the media had moved from an older deferential, or 'sacerdotal' approach to political reportage, to a more disdainful and critically superior attitude. These authors suggested that 'news values' (see Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O'Neill 2001; Bednarek and Caple 2017) was not sufficient explanation as to how news was covered. They claimed to have identified a breed of specialist journalists who took a more disdainful approach to their reporting. Members of this editorial elite were attuned to societal hierarchy and this was reflected in a 'sacerdotal ladder' in their reports – whether script, visuals, tone and expression of their delivery (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995: 56). Blumler and Gurevitch noted that the monarchy tended to receive the most respectful reports and that placed them on the top step. 'Slightly down the sacerdotal ladder, we may find the central institutions of the state and government, including Parliament' (ibid.). Blumler and Gurevitch's (1995) point is that the position a news actor occupies on the ladder will impact on how s/he will be treated by the news media. Single mothers, 'benefit

scroungers' and 'muggers' have traditionally been towards or at the lower end of the ladder. Blumler and Gurevitch's analysis is perceptive, certainly political editors often deliver hermeneutical priest-like interpretations of the church of politics. How this interplays with impartiality and regulations is something we seek to explore, especially when it comes to the under researched area of (non)verbal tone.

One final point is in order. Of course, no firm claim can be advanced about the real intentions of the speakers but only about their possible attempt to convey certain meanings; however, on the basis of the speakers' verbal and non-verbal communication Corbyn's identity as a political leader seems to be subject to intense criticism.

4. The Different Take on Jeremy Corbyn in the Various News Reports

4.1 Corbyn in the Reporters' Words

On 28th September 2016 Jeremy Corbyn's speech at the Labour Party conference was the main news story of the day covered by all the national UK providers, including BBC, C4, C5, ITN, Sky News. Praise and appreciation, but also incredulity and surprise, mixed with a persistent suspicion about the leader's skills are some of the themes that could be identified in the reports as they précised the speech with direct and indirect quotations. In this section of the paper, with the aim of highlighting the differences between the reports, we focus on comparable evening news programmes all sharing the figure of the political editor/correspondent and analyse both that section of the report and the initial newsreaders' opening.

An initial comparison of the opening précis by the newsreaders (Matt Frei for C4 News, Dermot Murnaghan for Sky News, Alastair Stewart for Independent Television News (ITN), Huw Edwards of the BBC, Matt Barbet for C5) suggests the C5 report (excerpt 2) was the most impartial, in terms of thoroughness and informativeness of the points covered in Corbyn's speech, although not in the original order in which they appeared (i.e. 1. immigration, 2. Labour party of protest and power, 3. Socialism of the 21st century, 4. End to trench warfare), and also in terms of a lack of an evaluative tone.

(2)

Barbet (C5): Jeremy Corbyn has appealed for an end to the trench warfare that's threatened to tear Labour apart. During his conference speech in Liverpool, he promised to deliver "the socialism of the 21st century". And he also insisted that under his Leadership, Labour WILL be a party not only of protest, but also of power. He also tackled immigration, saying he would not offer "false promises" on numbers.

Compared with C5, ITN's News at 10 (3) appears less impartial, in at least two instances - the use of the phrases 'rallying cry' and 'his views on immigration are unlikely to pacify some of his critics'. While the report carries a legitimate war metaphor, the former expression conjures up an idea of Corbyn having to

shout to rally his scattered disorderly soldiers, the latter sentence constructs an image of the leader as victim of opponents' attacks.

- (3)
Stewart (ITN): Delegates at the Labour conference cheered Jeremy Corbyn today, after he pledged to deliver what he called "21st century socialism". Mr Corbyn also called on party members to end the "trench warfare" of division and "work together to take on the Tories". But though his rallying cry was greeted with acclaim, his views on immigration are unlikely to pacify some of his critics.

Speaking directly to camera C4 Matt Frei (4) covers two of Jeremy Corbyn's themes and repeats his metaphor (Corbyn: 'It's true there's an electoral mountain to climb') in a straightforward cue.

- (4)
Matt Frei (C4): Labour CAN climb an electoral mountain, Jeremy Corbyn said this afternoon in his closing speech to the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool. The Labour Leader said his party had to be ready to fight a general election next year and appealed to end the trench warfare and take on the Tories. He also said there would be no false promises on immigration numbers but a new fund for higher migration areas instead.

In his cue, the Sky News presenter Dermot Murnaghan (5) first points out that dissenters and opponents of Corbyn's leadership were largely absent but then gives priority to the leader's positive attempt to unite the party, a basic requirement if Labour was to win power.

- (5)
Murnaghan (Sky): It was a wide-ranging address but the main message was clear, the party needs, he says, to end the trench warfare and reunite and take on the Tories.

BBC's Huw Edwards (6) is more selective in his opening report and more interpretive of Jeremy Corbyn's message; with indirect speech (IS) introduced by the neutral framing verb 'told', when he refers to the 'foundation of the party's programme':

- (6)
Edwards (BBC): Good evening. Jeremy Corbyn has told the Labour conference that Socialism for the 21st century will be the foundation of Party's programme'.

Besides the dictatorial tone conveyed by *told*, Edwards' choice of the word *foundation* to refer to the core of the Labour programme is an extrapolation from Corbyn's speech as the term appears nowhere in the original text (see excerpt below) and offers an interpretive guide for the viewers of the original text:

(7)
Jeremy Corbyn
in Liverpool:

...new forms of democratic public ownership, driven by investment in the technology and industries of the future, with decent jobs, education and housing for all with local services run by and for people not outsourced to faceless corporations. That's not backward-looking, it's the very opposite. It's the socialism of the 21st century.

It is not difficult to note the editorial choice made by the BBC that focuses openly on the politics of Jeremy Corbyn. After the cue, the reports are delivered by an identifiable correspondent/political editor (Robert Peston for ITN, Laura Kuenssberg for BBC, Andy Bell for C5 Faisal Islam for Sky News) or a disembodied one (Gary Gibbon for C4). Peston's report for ITN mixes scepticism ('In charge of his party after his landslide re-election, *but what chance he'll walk to victory in a general election?*') with uplifting Extremely Direct Speech (EDS) from Jeremy Corbyn's original delivery

(8)
Peston (ITN): Inset of Corbyn's speech: Yes, our party is about campaigning, and it's about protest too. But most of all, it's about winning power in local and national government to deliver the real change our country so desperately needs.

A casual tone marked by *now* uttered with a falling intonation accompanies the damming Narrator's Representation of Speech Act (NRSA) that tells us that in fact Corbyn did not say anything new and failed to address such burning issues as Brexit.

(9)
Peston (ITN): **Now, Jeremy Corbyn didn't announce many new initiatives.** There was a ban on arms sales to Saudi, more powerful trade unions, help for councils to build council houses, and **next to nothing on** the big challenge of our age, Brexit.

Using negation (see highlighted text in the above transcript) Peston sets up an expectation that Corbyn should have done more in the speech. On Brexit, it can be argued that this is fair given that Corbyn's position on Brexit had been criticised by many Labour party members. Peston's introduction is then diluted by an EDS containing Corbyn's actual words:

(10)
Jeremy Corbyn: A Labour government will not offer false promises on immigration, as the Tories have done. We will not sow division by fanning the flames of fear. We will tackle the real issues of immigration instead. It isn't migrants that drive down wages. It is exploitative employers and the politicians (APPLAUSE) WHO DEREGULATE THE LABOUR MARKET and rip up trade union rights.

Towards the end of the report a twist occurs. Peston appears on camera and it is at that point that his tone in terms of facial expression radically changes. His smiling face in close up and a slightly raised voice seem to suggest his satisfaction with Corbyn's performance.

(11)

Peston (ITV): That was Jeremy Corbyn's most assured performance since he became (Peston is now on camera) leader. There is no doubt that that challenge to him from MPs has made him bolder and more confident, (big smile) there is no chance of him going anytime soon (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Peston's facial expression on ITN

On the contrary, C4 has overall a more sceptical tone with a Gary Gibbon voiceover using IS to emphasise both at the beginning and end of the report the opposition Corbyn has encountered within his party. It is worth noting the absence of speech representation in the excerpts which are replaced by a broad and evaluative summary centring on a negative assessment of Corbyn's leadership. Gibbon's report opening:

(12)

Gibbon (C4): **75% of Labour MPs said they had no confidence in him and tried to topple him before** he'd been a year in the job. The wider party just voted Jeremy Corbyn back in, with a strengthened mandate. Today Jeremy Corbyn **tried to take on the criticism that a life of protest on the left** means he just doesn't get the need to win elections.

Report closing:

(13)

Gibbon (C4): But he and his team **often sound and look more strident**, in their first troubled year of leadership **they've shown their inexperience**, and Jeremy Corbyn returns in a couple of weeks to Westminster where he's surrounded not by adoring supporters but MPs who believe **he's an electoral catastrophe** waiting to happen.

While slightly more inclusive of Corbyn's points than the previous ITN reportage by Robert Peston, Gibbon's report is consistently sceptical. The

phrase ‘a life of protest on the left’ (example 12) is worth commenting on. It is not Corbyn’s who in his speech mentions protest on two occasions: the first, referring to the Hillsborough incident⁵, has little to do with political fighting per se and is not mentioned explicitly in any of the news reports; the second (‘our party is about campaigning and it’s about protest too’) is more light-weight than Gibbon’s ‘life of protest on the left’ which constructs a Labour party permanently and simply involved in contestation but not campaigning for projects and ideas.

Unlike the other report, Gibbon uses earlier comments by deputy leader Tom Watson whose earlier critical comment is reported without scepticism to suggest Corbyn lacks political novelty and is diluting his left wing message:

- (14)
Gibbon (C4): Yesterday the deputy leader Tom Watson said the party should be about reforming capitalism not replacing it. Today, Jeremy Corbyn sounded like he was on a similar page. Much of the speech could have been delivered by his predecessor Ed Miliband.

In this case Gibbon’s condemnation may not be immediately apparent. However, considering his report is an act of ostensible communication that aims to be appropriate to the context and relevant (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 270), his sequence of three sentences signposted by *Yesterday*, *Today* and *Much*, is crucial in diminishing the Labour leader. Gibbon’s pseudo-syllogistic construction clearly implies that not only did Jeremy Corbyn follow in Watson’s footsteps (*Yesterday*), and advocate a reformed capitalism (*Today*); also, and conclusively, that there was nothing new in his speech which was very similar to Ed Miliband, the previous moderate Labour leader (*Much*). Sandwiched between Tom Watson and Ed Miliband whose politics he is said to be following or even imitating (in the case of the latter), once again Corbyn is misrepresented as a leader proposing old ideas who simply follows in someone else’s steps.

Unlike other reports, the BBC’s political editor Laura Kuenssberg, opens on an apparently positive note, except for the adversative conjunction *but* introducing what she defines Corbyn’s *offer*, i.e. the buzz phrase ‘Socialism of the 21st century’. Interestingly, she seems to establish a distinction between ‘followers’ and ‘viewers’, addressed by the direct pronoun *you*. The implication is that while the former may not see Corbyn’s limitations, the viewers will use better judgement and will be less easily convinced by his new slogan the ‘Socialism of the 21st century’.

Kuenssberg’s opening report:

- (15)
Kuenssberg (BBC): Coming out on top in charge of his party. So what happens now? There’s no change in the devotion of his **followers** (Inset of conference: Yes, we can! Yes, we can!) **but this is his offer to you.** (Inset of Jeremy Corbyn’s speech: It is a socialism of the 21st-century. APPLAUSE.)

Laura Kuenssberg focuses on an accurate précis of the Labour leader's political programme, which she prefaces with 'he made ten familiar promises' that emphasises the lack of novelty of Corbyn's political programme.

(16)

Corbyn: Full employment, a home's guarantee, security at work, a strong, public National Health Service and social care. A national education service (.) for all.

(17)

Kuenssberg (BBC): He made ten **familiar** promises coming to a leaflet near you.

EDS of Corbyn: Full employment, a home's guarantee, security at work, a strong, public National Health Service and social care, a national education service for all. Vows too on climate change, public services, inequality and peace. His articles of faith.

This point has a distinct air of scorn and disrespect. For instance at the end of a list of Corbyn's ten policy pledges, Kuenssberg prefaces the Labour leader's metaphor of the Ten Commandments brought down from the mountain by Moses. By referring to Corbyn's pledges by the religious sounding term *vow* and the phrase *articles of faith*, Kuenssberg portrays Corbyn as a prophet rather than a politician and his programme as something that his supporters, like disciples, believe in with closed eyes without questions.

(18)

Kuenssberg (BBC): (List of ten political measures) His articles of faith.

EDS of Corbyn: Don't worry, Conference. They are not the Ten Commandments. I have not come down from the mountain with them \$.

Then the description of the Labour's new programme continues after the Kuenssberg's reference to Corbyn's attack on the Conservatives:

(19)

Kuenssberg (BBC): There would be a bigger tax on business to pay for education, but despite the referendum result, on anxieties over immigration, **he aims to ease the strains, not cut the numbers.**

In this statement the negative clearly raises the presupposition that once again Corbyn is letting people down given that he is not talking about cutting immigrant numbers. Corbyn's socialist message in his speech (reproduced in excerpt 10 above and 20 below) is lost to yet another condemnation - that he fails to do something people expect of him.

(20)

Corbyn: A Labour Government will not offer false promises on immigration, as the Tories have done. We will not sow division by fanning the flames of fear. We will act decisively **to end the undercutting of workers' pay** and conditions through the **exploitation of migrant labour** and agency working. Labour will **reinstate the**

migrant impact fund and give extra **support to areas of high migration**.

Despite the attention to Corbyn's political programme, in a report totally devoid of speech representation, Kuenssberg does not spare her disdain as to what she defines a *grand-sounding vision* and a *broad outline of Jeremy Corbyn's beliefs* that construct the Labour leader as a proposing a plan that sounds *grand* while it is in fact a simple repeat of stale political ideas.

(21)

Kuenssberg (BBC): It was a **grand-sounding vision**, "socialism for the 21st century". But it was more Jeremy Corbyn's greatest hits, a **broad outline of his long-held beliefs**, than a detailed argument to persuade you to vote Labour at the next election.

This reveals further contempt and a textually created opposition between Corbyn and the television audience. Kuenssberg stretches the 'Corbyn as pop star or messiah' metaphor (*vision, greatest hits, beliefs*) while foregrounding her views rather than allowing Corbyn's own words to speak for themselves. As she makes these comments, Kuenssberg appears on camera in an close-up (see figure 2 below). Her tone is serious without any concession to irony as can be identified elsewhere in her report.

However, as she criticises Corbyn for not providing a solid *argument* to convince us, the electorate (which she addresses directly by an engaging *you* and an intense eye line), she shows, what appears to be, a disdainful expression on her face (Fig 2 below) notably different for example, from the neutral and occasionally smiling facial appreciation of Robert Peston on ITN.



Fig. 2: Laura Kuenssberg in medium close-up shot on BBC

Kuenssberg appears to undermine Corbyn ('He was confident, **but in his comfort zone**'). This phrase adds little useful to the report and has a scornful tone which suggests that Kuenssberg is seeking to convey critical distance from Corbyn. Kuenssberg concludes her report with words of further incredulity, of still having to convince *millions* of voters:

(22)

Kuenssberg (BBC): Jeremy Corbyn's supporters believe his Labour is much more than a cover version of the party of old. But **echoes of the past** are all around. He has inspired **thousands** on the left, but he has yet to show that **millions** will join his chorus. Laura Kuenssberg, BBC News, Liverpool.

Similarly, the *echoes of the past are all around* is a reference to the 'return to the 1970s/80s' narrative that has been a theme of the news media since Corbyn's 2015 rise to prominence; its narrative is used as a shorthand for a period during which Labour were seen to be unelectable socialists and dominated by the trade unions and left militants. It is not a narrative Corbyn encouraged and is one that by mid-2017 has been shown to be of the media's less insightful analysis of Corbyn's policies and strategies. Once again, we have no speech representation here, while the opening phrase *supporters believe* represents merely speculation, accompanied by the statement, indeed the understatement, *He has inspired thousands*.

In conclusion, in response to the original question as to whether the BBC offers a more negative portrayal of Corbyn our case study comparison of one news item suggests that this is the case but not blatantly. Subtle differences emerge in terms of representation of Corbyn's speech and, in the case of BBC, a noticeable preference for a clear immediate political focus to the exclusion of the other themes, such as the apology for the Iraq War (which is only reported in EDS by a Corbyn inset but not commented on by Kuenssberg), the strategy to end the party's internal controversies (end of trench war or 'the heal[ing of] Labour wounds' according to Sky News, which again is only reported by EDS but receives no comment) or the plan to end global terrorism (end weapon sales to Saudi, which is not mentioned in Kuenssberg's report). As it is not possible to document every aspect of a long political speech in a news report, we believe we have chosen is significant to make our case.

4.2 Non Textual Partiality

We wanted to widen our investigation of the BBC from just the main news because it is possible that the attacks on the Corporation may have been motivated coverage in current affairs content too. In this second part of the paper therefore we engage in the discussion of different 'tools' that reporters can employ. We analyse another BBC programme that covered Corbyn's speech, *Newsnight*, also broadcast on 28th September. The analysis in this report was 1 min 45 seconds (which we investigate) followed by a longer package of small focus groups assessing Corbyn while watching his speech (which we do not analyse). While our focus is still on how that speech is reported, our evaluation includes tackling the points raised in the *Newswatch* programme about tone which we discussed earlier.

Besides the wording itself, we noticed the tone of the anchors' and political editors' voices whether it was a) serious or jokingly supercilious, b) faithfully reporting Corbyn's speech or c) speculating on Corbyn's beliefs and the voters' reactions. The different tone whether matter-of-fact, ironical, distant and critical or even disdainful suggests the discursive positioning vis-à-vis Corbyn by the journalists. We therefore considered tone as the pragmatic use of language and non-verbal facial expression and associated it with what the

literature has termed ‘disdainful’ (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995) vis-à-vis the subject matter.

Presented by Evan Davis with the editorial participation of Nicholas Watt, on 28th September at 2016 *Newsnight* presents a more informal report of the Corbyn’s speech but with subtle message of apparent disdain. In Davis’s words, Corbyn’s one hour-long speech was successful, albeit perhaps excessively stern (‘lacking in humour’).

(23)

Davis (BBC): In Liverpool, it was Jeremy Corbyn's big day, his second conference speech as leader. An hour long, it was undoubtedly considerably more confidently delivered than some of his others. More cleverly populist in its themes; I thought more aspiration, optimism and sunny socialist upland than you sometimes get, and a number of specific ideas in there too -perhaps a bit lacking in humour.

Watt accentuates the disdainful tone (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995) of the report in the sense of a superior detached attitude of the report delivered by journalists who due to their expertise and inside knowledge of the political area are entitled and even expected to express their judgement and critical evaluation. Such a tone praises Corbyn’s success while in fact showing incredulity for the sudden and unexpected, ‘most fluent and polished performance we have seen from Corbyn’. If Davis smiles benevolently, Nick Watt’s facial expression is, what is best described as, a smirk (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Watt’s smirk on BBC *Newsnight*

Watt’s commentary is reproduced in full below.

(24)

Evan Davis (BBC): But let's hear what our political editor thinks - Nick Watt is with me. What did you think Nick?

Watt:

This was Jeremy Corbyn’s best speech on a national stage. His aide is joking that he’s been learning on the job but a year into the job and after that challenge, this was the most fluent and polished performance we have seen from Corbyn. *Now* there were messages for his critics who say **you’re**

only interested in forming and leading a protest group and he said **protesting and campaigning is at the heart of the Labour movement** but the most important thing it does it seeks to win power at a national and local level to improve people's lives. **Now he did have** messages for his supporters, he **did say** that was right for him to apologise on behalf of the party for the Iraq war and we **did hear** on four occasions the word that dare not speak its name, [socialism.

Davis

[socialism. Yeah \$

As he put the party on an election footing, **it did feel** like **an attempt** to reach out to the wider electorate and really explain some of the ideas and policies that would form the heart of an election campaign led by him. This would be for example allowing councils to borrow against the housing stock to allow extra 1200 homes to be built a year and also encouraging children to learn an instrument through a 160 million arts Pupil Premium programme. But as his critics say, as Ed Miliband found out, you can dream the greatest dreams in the world, but unless you have economic credibility, no one will take you seriously.

Watt's report is characterised by a casual style revolving around the choice of Direct Speech (DS) when he embeds a fabricated exchange between Corbyn and his critics 'who say you're only interested in forming and leading a protest group and he said protesting and campaigning is at the heart of the Labour movement.' His commentary is also marked by repetition of emphatic forms, (*he did have, he did say, we did hear*) while the repeated pragmatic discourse marker (Schiffrin 1987, and Fraser 1999 among many others) *now* at the beginning of his utterances increases the force of the repeated declarative speech act (Holmes 1984: 355) that Corbyn addressed both his supporters and critics and seems to have a double function. The first use of *now* is probably disaffiliative (see Waring 2003 on discourse marker *also*) as in 'Now, let's move on to something else' and marks the end of his appreciation of Jeremy Corbyn's performance 'this was the most fluent and polished performance we have seen from Corbyn.' The second use of *now* on the contrary seems to have the function of calling the hearer's attention to the upcoming talk, as in 'Now, let's start' while at the same time it acts as an evaluative measure as in 'Now, that's a different point' to comment on Corbyn's various positions vis-à-vis his critics and his supporters. The moment when Davis and Watt overlap in a joint laughter episode is over Corbyn's use of the word *socialism*, which Watt remarks was uttered exactly *four* times in the speech, this is crucial to understanding the tone of this report. In terms of prosody, the fact that the two speakers collude in a laughter episode repeating each other's words at the same pitch, is according to Couper-Kuhlen (1996 in Culpeper et al 2003: 1574) can be understood as a token of agreement. Davis and Watt here are therefore acting as if they share the very same patronising and critical stance on Corbyn.

From the opening, Watt's words (*This was Jeremy Corbyn's best speech on a national stage*) seem to deliver open praise of Corbyn's performance, yet the editor he then positions himself, and some unidentified others, as evaluators of the Labour leader (although this is their role in a programme like *Newsnight*) and Corbyn as someone under scrutiny as if still being trained as

a politician. The repetitions and emphatic forms we have commented on above also contribute to portraying Corbyn as still not fully developed as a leader even though Watt lists positively some of the points covered in his Liverpool address. Furthermore, Watt refers to the impression Corbyn may have had on the conference, not in rational but emotional terms, as in the comment: *it did **feel** like an attempt to reach out to the wider electorate* which uses a verb of perception and a mental process (Martin, Matthiessen and Painter 1997). While this could be read as hedging and diluting a direct evaluation on the part of Watt, it probably also conjured up for Corbyn a scenario of tentativeness and an emotional sphere that pertains to perceiving, sensing and feeling that emasculates Corbyn and suggests he lacks the character for leadership.

As we mentioned earlier, the overall tone is not realised just by the choice of words; the facial expression of Nick Watt especially (as we showed earlier) but also of Evan Davis too (even if his smile is justified by the lightweight nature of the Corbyn item compared with the tragic subject matter of the previous one on the Syrian warsuggests these journalists' sense of critical superiority over Corbyn. Watt smiles throughout his report, his eyes appearing to gleam as he talks, although it is in the first part of his commentary that his critical attitude is seemingly most blatant. Davis equally changes his serious look to a quizzical, disbelieving expression (Fig. 4 and 5 below).



Fig. 4: Davis's serious expression when reporting about Syria



Fig. 5: Davis's smile when introducing the Corbyn report

In both the conclusion of this report, at least in the first part of it, and Davis' introduction, Jeremy Corbyn is praised; however, the bulk of the report clearly expresses doubts that Corbyn has the ability to be seen as leader outside Party faithful.

Such pragmatic behaviour has been studied widely. According to Lachenicht (1980), positive aggravation is 'designed to show the addressee that he is not approved of, is not esteemed, does not belong, and will not receive cooperation' (p. 619). Similarly, Austin (1990: 285, in Culpeper et al 2003: 1554) offers an account of how some utterances can be perceived as offensive by the hearer as in *You have been a capable and decorative chairman*. In other words, both Davis and Watt produce only an apparent evaluation of Corbyn or 'judgement', i.e. a language resource 'deployed for construing moral evaluations of behaviour' (Martin 2001: 145); in effect, Corbyn is being negatively assessed. A suitable model to interpret such pragmatic behaviour is Mock Politeness (Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2011) as a form of impoliteness and aggression. Locher (2004: 90, in Culpeper 2011: 101) notes that over-politeness is often perceived negatively, while for Culpeper (2011: 94) mock politeness is realised by patronising, condescending, mocking, degrading but also inappropriate and 'derisory' (Bousfield 2008: 179) language. As (im)politeness is usually studied in an interaction when the person to whom one is being impolite is present, in support of our analysis we refer to gossip (Coates 2015; Jones 1990; Jaworski and Coupland 2005; Robbles in this issue; and with regard to television, Thornborrow and Morris 2004, among others) as the interactional activity during which speakers talk about an absent person. The situation of the two journalists, Davis and Watt, expressing judgement about Corbyn seems similar to that of speakers talking behind someone's back in her/his absence. In this case Davis and Watt on screen connive with the viewers to diminish Corbyn by damning him by faint praise while of course he is not there.

Specifically, Davis introduces the news item (excerpt 24) by applauding Corbyn with an overly adverbial sentence ('it was undoubtedly considerably more confidently delivered than some of his others') but the implication that arises from his whole summary is that his expectation of such good performance was nil: clearly Corbyn's successful speech was a surprise as his other speeches had not been confidently delivered. Similarly, the indirect meaning of Davis's next utterance 'More cleverly populist [...] more aspiration, optimism and sunny socialist upland' is that Corbyn's speech in Liverpool was a rare exception. The climax of the apparent condescension however is reached in Davis's comment *and a number of specific ideas in there too* which accompanied by a smile and a slight twitch of his head to the right, again appears to express his surprise at the fact that Corbyn even has political beliefs, and therefore implicitly putting him down.

In news reports viewers are, at alternative times, the direct interlocutors and addressees of the television's messages as well the eavesdroppers and onlookers of those messages. In the former case, the speakers' direct eye contact establishing an imaginary line or vector with the viewer (Kress and

Van Leeuwen 1996) calls for, or rather demands. their direct involvement; in the other case, however, the collusion between newsreader and editor/reporter only indirectly involves the viewer casting them in the role of onlookers. Without a full understanding of these roles we cannot appreciate how mock politeness or other forms of impoliteness are realised. Bousfield (2008) refers to Thomas (1995) who distinguishes between Addressee (Real and Ostensible) and Hearers (Bystander and Overhearer). This is very much in line with what Bubel (2008) identifies as germane to film (and we can add television) communication, where the audience is generally not the ostensible addressee but the overhearer. News items reports alternate indirect communication to the audience (treated as overhearers) with direct address (for instance in the case of anchors' presentations, like Davis's above).

In the *Newsnight* exchange between Davis and Watt, the audience are endowed with a high degree of agency as viewers are expected to understand that the two journalists are in fact diminishing Jeremy Corbyn while seeming to applaud him. With Davis inaugurating the specific tone of the report, this is a case in which a witty attack on Corbyn's 'face' (Goffman 1967), as the positive social value a person effectively claims for him/herself, is realised and the audience connive with the journalists to treat Corbyn as a non-participant and absent target (as in gossip as discussed by Robles in this issue). In identity terms, the two journalists bond and construct an 'ingroup' as they share an apparently negative stance towards Corbyn and, as in a gossip activity where the interlocutors have to ensure that it is acceptable to air such condemnation of an absent third party, Davis and Watt feel licensed to ironise Corbyn—through a tone of mild disbelief. - on Corbyn in the disdainful reporting/editorial style we have been discussing. False praise, surprise and incredulity therefore can at times be the BBC 's not necessarily intended way of realising mock politeness about Corbyn and the vehicle for diminishing his stature in front of the audiences.

Our analysis was assisted in that the 'expert' view came from Nick Watt rather than Laura Kuenssberg whose Corbyn reporting delivery has been particularly controversial⁶. There is a wider debate often in social media but also by media commentators as to whether Kuenssberg's facial expressions and her way of speaking, often said to be sneering, is actually a physiological issue and that is not resolved. No such issue arises with Nick Watt. The BBC would undoubtedly argue that as a news magazine programme the expected *Newsnight* style is less rigid than a news report. However, we felt that as that since the programme often uses the same reporters as do the news bulletins, then their presumed impartiality should not be an issue - the jokiness of the Evan Davis/Nick Watt exchange appeared to undermine that sense of impartiality.

5. Conclusion

Starting from a consideration of the charges of partiality and bias that have been levelled against the BBC, our intent in the present paper was to ascertain, even if on a very small scale, the degree of impartiality of this public TV provider in comparison with others. The case study we conducted of a news item about Jeremy Corbyn's Liverpool speech after his confirmation as Labour

leader highlighted some differences and showed that the BBC chose to emphasise Corbyn's political programme more than other channels. Kuenssberg's report is in conflict with the analysis delivered by the other channels and looks, with the benefit of hindsight, the most opinionated, the least accurate or insightful. We continued our analysis and engaged with another BBC programme that may have triggered the criticisms against the public provider. *Newsnight* seemed to reveal a critical and detached positioning in the language of its presenter and political editor. Both the BBC programmes analysed put emphasis on the use of the word *socialism* compared to the other reports examined. The BBC reports gave the appearance of being less impartial than the other TV reports, even with the sceptical tone of the political editors Peston (for ITV) and Gibbon (for C4). The BBC seemed to pick elements that were more akin to scorn rather than scepticism. The tone of the report, defined as the pragmatic use of language and the non-verbal facial expression of the speakers, was disdainful and distant, with the two journalists clearly voicing and performing their incredulity at the successful performance of the Labour leader, thus implying that their expectations were very low.

The other BBC programme we discussed, *Newswatch* broadcast a few days before the other bulletins considered in the rest of the study, interestingly revealed how viewers note the very same elements of bias and lack of impartiality that our analysis brought to the fore. We noted the concerns of some of the BBC's critics about tone. It is striking, we believe, that the viewer Foley discusses mood, tone of voice and most importantly the expression of incredulity that journalists convey in their speech when reporting on Jeremy Corbyn's performances. That incredulity and surprise are the very elements we highlighted in the analysis of the report by Davis and Watt. We hope our analysis provides an initial step in developing the impact of non-verbal aspects such as tone and collusion in order to broaden multimodal critical discourse analysis and enhance its use as an analytical tool.

In conclusion, although we cannot claim to have reached firm results with a single case study, we hope that our paper shows the choices the BBC (as well as other providers) can make vis-à-vis their coverage of Corbyn and the variety of tools at its disposal. Needless to say, to prove the BBC (im)partiality requires a much more multi-disciplinary and broader study and that is the aim of our proposed wider project.

Notes

- 1 (.) indicates a small pause. All symbols are explained in the methodology section.
- 2 See for example, Cammaerts et al. 2016; Media Reform Coalition 2015, 2016.
- 3 Responsibility for regulating the BBC now rests with the Office of Communications (OfCom)
- 4 Fox News ceased broadcasting to the UK in August 2017 (BBC 2017b).
- 5 Jeremy Corbyn's Liverpool speech: 'And I know some people say campaigns and protests don't change things. But the Hillsborough families have shown just how wrong that is. It's taken twenty-seven years but those families have, with great courage and dignity, finally got some truth and justice for the ninety-six who died. And I want to pay tribute to all the families and campaigners, for their solidarity, their commitment and their love'

- 6 It is worth noting that In January 2017 the BBC Trust ruled that a report on Jeremy Corbyn in November 2015 by Kuenssberg broke the broadcaster's impartiality and accuracy guidelines.

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