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## **The effect of iconicity and embodiment on the spread of media frames**

### *Riassunto*

Questo studio analizza il rapporto tra *framing*, metafore e cognizione incarnata nel discorso giornalistico e politico sulla Brexit. Il *framing* è una strategia comunicativa che seleziona e mette in rilievo specifici aspetti della realtà al fine promuovere interpretazioni specifiche di un evento. Le metafore, radicate in esperienze culturali e corporee condivise, costituiscono potenti dispositivi nel processo di *framing* perché, facendo leva sulla mente incarnata del pubblico, possono evocare risposte emotive e rendere più tangibili anche questioni politiche astratte. Nel caso studio viene presentato il frame del *Brexit ticking clock*, descrivendone le principali articolazioni metaforiche e il loro uso nel discorso mediatico.

*Parole chiave:* framing; metafore concettuali; cognizione incarnata; iconicità; discorso politico

### *Abstract*

This paper investigates the relationship between framing, metaphors, and embodied cognition in shaping public discourse, particularly focusing on the Brexit narrative. Framing is a communication strategy that emphasises certain aspects of a reality to promote specific interpretations of an event or an issue. Metaphors rooted in shared cultural and physical experiences serve as powerful devices in the framing process, tapping into the audience's embodied mind to evoke emotional responses and make abstract political issues more tangible. In this work, the frame of the 'Brexit ticking clock' is presented, which makes use of various sub-metaphors to influence public perception, facilitating the spread of specific views and enhancing the memorability and persuasiveness of the message.

*Keywords:* framing; conceptual metaphor; embodied cognition; iconicity; political discourse

## **1. Introduction**

In media and political communication, the way events and issues are presented to the public holds substantial power in shaping collective understanding and discourse. Framing, strategically used in this context, involves the selection

and emphasis of certain aspects of a perceived reality to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 1993). By building strong frames, a passive audience can be influenced in how it perceives problems, attributes causality and agency, or evaluates morality. At the heart of effective framing lies the use of linguistic devices like metaphors, which can bridge the gap between abstract concepts and tangible, embodied experiences of individuals (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981). By drawing upon shared cultural knowledge and physical experiences, metaphors can evoke vivid imagery and emotional responses, making the framed message more relatable and memorable (Semino et al., 2018; Winter & Matlock, 2017).

This paper explores the effect of iconicity and embodiment on the spread of media frames, investigating this phenomenon within the context of discourse of Brexit which, like any highly polarised and emotionally charged event, has been framed to propose various points of view both in the media and in political communication. By analysing metaphors such as the ‘Brexit ticking clock’, we also consider how different media outlets and political agendas have used the same underlying metaphor to build opposite narratives around the same event.

While previous studies have focused on metaphors such as the ship in a storm, marriage/divorce, war, and the cliff edge, the ticking clock frame has, to our knowledge, not been systematically analysed in the Brexit discourse. This study therefore contributes by identifying and examining a set of metaphors absent from earlier scholarship regarding the Brexit discourse.

Understanding how iconic representations of events and embodiment influence the spread of media frames is important now more than ever, since, in an era characterised by rapid information exchange and the proliferation of digital media platforms, both framed news and the metaphors on which they are built can go viral and shape public discourse with unprecedented speed. The iconic weight of these frames, due to the underlying metaphors on which they are built, becomes a powerful tool to share a perceived reality through mental images as well.

In the following section we will provide the theoretical background of this paper to pave the way to Section 3 where, through a review of previous studies on the framing of Brexit, we will highlight key metaphors identified in earlier research. Section 4 presents our analysis of the ‘Brexit ticking clock’ metaphors, examining their use in media and political discourse and

the ways they have been used to frame the event itself. Finally, Section 5 offers conclusions and reflections on the implications of our findings for future research on framing analysis.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### *2.1 Framing and Metaphors*

Framing is conceptualised in social sciences as a communication strategy, often used in journalism and political language, involving the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicating text, in order to promote a particular definition of a problem, causal interpretation or moral evaluation (Entman, 1993:52). Certain aspects of an event or issue will be highlighted while others will be minimised or ignored, thereby promoting a particular interpretation of that event, which can either shed positive or negative light depending on the political agenda of politicians - as regards political discourse - or the views of the media outlet sharing the news. In the past decades, framing as a strategy and frames as interpretation spotlights of an event have increasingly been studied and analysed from both sociological and linguistic points of view (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; David et al., 2011; Linström & Marais, 2012), and a recent interest in framing detection has emerged from a computational perspective (Ali & Hassan, 2022).

Nonetheless, framing is still often seen as a “fractured paradigm”, as it was referred to in Entman’s work. Fractured because, in order for frames to be effective and actually start to spin in public discourse (de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2011), they need strong linguistic and cultural roots: they need, in other words, to be recognisable by the public as something that pertains to their individual and collective experience. Here, we find a first clue defining the strong relationship between frames, embodiment, and emotions. In fact, the relationship between frames and individual experience – and, on a broader level, one could assume with embodiment as well – has been there since Goffman’s first definition of a frame:

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events - at least social ones - and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify (1974:10-11).

In this definition, he states that our perception of situations and events is made of some organisational principles as well as of our subjective involvement in the event itself. Thus, Goffman's definition of a frame – which is, again, one's perception of a situation – already gives importance to both one's personal engagement and emotional responses to them. Considering the constant mediation between the social and individual aspects of an event's description entailed by Goffman's definition, the importance of the individual itself becomes evident also in nowadays' framing landscapes, since research points out “a panorama drawn by certain consolidated frames, a repertoire of recurring images, iconic representations of the foreigner, of the ‘evil’, of the ‘enemy’ and of the ‘different’” (Binotto & Bruno, 2018:17).

As we have said, framing stands as a specific communication strategy used in political discourse and newspapers language or, really, in any type of communication where one wants to consciously depict an event in a certain way for the benefit of the public, in order to follow a specific agenda. Framing can be seen, then, as a process, or, rather, as a production line where the products are none other than strategically built descriptions of events which convey pre-built points of views that can sprout in the mind of the passive audience. This process can be roughly summarised as follows: given an event to describe and an interpretation to favour, spin doctors start selecting which aspects of the event they must emphasise in order to convey the framed information. Language is, of course, one of the main tools they have at their disposal and words are carefully selected. However, since, as we have mentioned, frames are built to spin better when they strike an emotional response, specific linguistic devices, like metaphors or stereotyped images, are used to come closer to the reader's or the listener's individual life experience (Semino et al., 2018).

Once the news is framed according to the chosen perceived reality, it is presented to the public. Then, if the frame itself has been well built, it will influence the audience's perspective on the issue it relates to. In a way, it's like wearing a pair of tinted sunglasses: once one has them on, one will see the world in that shade of colour, and that only. Of course, this is not to say that frames are everywhere around us and cannot be noticed. In fact, the influence they have on the individuals depends on their experience of the world

itself, as Goffman argues (Jameson, 1976). This is why we use the term passive audience when speaking about the effect of media and political frames: resorting again to the pair of tinted sunglasses metaphor, one might simply take them off to see the world's diverse colours.

When used as one of the devices to frame an event, metaphors work like what Goffman (1974:45) would have called a "schema of interpretation": they allow people to locate, perceive, identify and label issues and events in relation to their experience.

Metaphor schemas preserving a relatively high level of specificity and relatively rich cultural knowledge in the source domain such as *HANDLING A DISEASE IS A WAR* or *VIRUS IS A KILLER* can be used [...] as a way of expressing a (preliminary) understanding as well as evoking an emotive response. They can also be used to frame policies intended to halt the spread of the disease in question. Using the wrong policy framed by the wrong metaphor can have devastating social, economic, psychological and animal welfare consequences (Zynken et al., 2008: 243).

As Zynken points out, metaphors serve as tools to convey a preliminary understanding as well as to evoke an emotive response. And, when they are sufficiently culturally rooted in the audience's mind, they work throughout time. In fact, for example, the longstanding metaphors described in the above quote, *HANDLING A DISEASE IS A WAR* and *A VIRUS IS A KILLER* strike a communal chord in our memory since they have been recently used, since 2020, to describe and frame Covid-19 in both political and media discourses (Semino, 2021).

As already stated, metaphors can play a crucial role in the framing process (Brugman et al., 2019), acting as powerful tools that shape our understanding of and emotional response to an event or issue, leveraging experiential and cultural information. Metaphors can bridge the gap between abstract concepts and tangible experiences by leaning on the audience's embodied mind (Winter & Matlock, 2017). In this respect, metaphors are not just linguistic expressions but can be deeply rooted in our physical and sensory experiences. As Lakoff and Johnson (1981) state, our understanding of the world is often governed by metaphors, which are anchored in the physical dimensions we interact with. For instance, we often use spatial metaphors such as "up" for good and "down" for bad, which are based on our bodily experiences of these directions.

Furthermore, these spatial metaphors can shape our understanding of time but also influence our emotional responses. For instance, verbs like “fly” and “drag” are used to describe the passage of time while also reflecting our subjective experiences. Happy moments might “fly by” while boring moments might “drag on” linguistically demonstrating how emotions become interconnected with our perception of time. To contextualise this into the framing process, choosing to strategically report something as either “dragging on” or “flying by” will evoke certain distinct feelings, experiences, and semantic fields in the mind of the audience, influencing their perception of the event. Of course, the cultural specificity of these devices can also be shown through an example of a spatial time-metaphor: while for some of us, future events are seen as being in front of us and the past as behind us, the Aymara people of South America view the past as ahead because it is known, and the future as behind because it is unknown (Núñez & Sweetser, 2006).

## 2.2 Metaphors as iconic framing devices

When used effectively in framing, metaphors create *iconic representations* that resonate with audiences on a broad emotional level (Boeynaems et al., 2017). By evoking vivid images, they allow people to *feel* about a framed issue in much the same way they would respond to the physical experiences suggested by the metaphor. For instance, describing a stock market crash as a *financial storm* conjures imagery of chaos and uncontrollable forces, prompting a sense of fear or urgency (Ervas et al., 2015). Similarly, the use of war metaphors during the pandemic – casting the virus as a *killer enemy* – elicited strong emotional responses and shaped perceptions of risk and threat.

In linguistics and semiotics, iconicity has traditionally been defined as a motivated relationship of similarity between a linguistic form and its meaning (Peirce, 1931–58; Jakobson, 1965; Haiman, 1980). Classic accounts focus on phenomena such as onomatopoeia, iconic word order, or structural isomorphisms between linguistic and conceptual patterns. Yet Peirce’s later writings expand this view, suggesting that icons are not confined to a separate class of signs but participate in all semiosis, functioning as “an image of the idea signified” (CP 2.222, 1903). From this perspective, icons lie at the root of verbal symbols and indices, since all signs evoke mental images that serve

as icons of their signification. Building on this insight, Nöth (2015) identifies a “third paradigm” of iconicity research: iconicity is not exceptional but ubiquitous, because every symbolic act of interpretation is mediated by the generation of mental images.

In this broader sense, metaphors can be seen as *iconic framing devices*. They are not only symbolic mappings but also iconic in nature, since their linguistic form mirrors embodied cognitive structures and prompts vivid, image-like construals (El Refaie, 2010). Research on metaphor scenarios shows that recurring narrative frames – such as the “body politic” or the “ship in a storm” – gain persuasive force precisely because they are recognisable and culturally shared, triggering concrete mental imagery (Musolff, 2021). The theory of *image schemas* (Johnson, 1987; Gibbs, 2005) further explains this process, demonstrating how metaphors draw on embodied patterns such as blockage or enablement. Recent work on political discourse confirms that such schemas amplify the emotional impact of metaphor scenarios: by activating experiences of being blocked, breaking free, or taking control, they render abstract political processes experientially vivid and affectively charged (Martín de la Rosa, 2024).

This is the sense of iconicity adopted in this article: not as phonological resemblance or syntactic isomorphism, but as the discursive capacity of metaphors to transform abstract political processes into concrete, memorable images. By tapping into embodied experience, metaphors craft compelling narratives that linger in collective memory and shape public perception, often below the level of conscious awareness (Sperber et al., 2010). In media and political discourse, such metaphors can subtly steer opinion or reinforce existing viewpoints, which is why identifying and analysing them is crucial for understanding how frames exert their persuasive power.

### 3. The metaphors of Brexit

In the following sections, we are going to refer to previous analyses of the metaphors used to talk about Brexit in the UK media outlets, before delving into the new metaphors highlighted in this work. The Brexit discourse is rich with metaphors that frame the event in emotionally resonant and vivid terms, and some of them give an insight into the polarised sentiments surrounding the event. Some of the metaphors analysed in the past include: A SHIP IN A

STORM, the MARRIAGE/DIVORCE dichotomy, WAR – which, as we have seen, is a fruitful metaphorical source in different contexts – and THE EDGE OF A CLIFF.

Charteris-Black (2019) found that the metaphor of a “ship in a storm” was frequently used to depict the tumultuous and unpredictable nature of Brexit. This metaphor evokes a sense of crisis and struggle, suggesting that the UK was navigating through rough waters, facing challenges from all directions. However, the Brexit discourse is characterised by polarised sentiments. This, of course, is reflected in the metaphors used to frame it: the same image of a ship in a storm was also used to build another opposite perceived reality. In fact, a ship making its way through rough water can also symbolise resilience, determination, and the potential for overcoming adversity. Just as a ship braves the storm to reach calmer seas, this metaphor would also highlight the UK’s strength and perseverance in facing Brexit’s challenges. The Brexit ship metaphor was mainly used in financial discourse, often in order to emphasise the negative impacts it might have on the national economy, such as market instability or economic downturns. The source domain of a ship in a storm was evoked through different expressions, such as “Brexit ship hitting the rocks” and “navigating Brexit”, with the first conveying a negative framing of the issue and the second conveying its positive counterpart.

As Milizia and Spinzi (2020) point out, the marriage/divorce metaphor frames Brexit as the end of a long-term relationship that was previously sanctioned by a marriage. This metaphor resonates on an emotional level by portraying the UK and the EU as long-term partners that, after a marriage together, are going through a contentious separation. It brings to light issues of loyalty, betrayal, and the complex negotiations over shared assets and responsibilities, like in an actual divorce, and it serves both to simplify the complex legal proceedings of Brexit and to emotionally charge the public discourse about it. Specifically, the metaphor of marriage/divorce is powerful due to its emotional and moral implications, suggesting a stressful and hostile process, that will be directly relatable by the audience to something that could, could have, or has happened to them in their personal life. The frequent media references to the divorce bill and the depiction of the EU-UK relationship as a marriage of convenience are some of the ways in which metaphorical language was used to paint an iconic picture of the event in the audience’s mind.



Used as a framing device, the war metaphor raises feelings of fear and uncertainty, while also conveying a renewed need for a strong internal community. In the present case, it casts Brexit as a battle, often seen as a real war of liberation from the EU that, in this frame, is seen as an oppressor (Musolff, 2021). By depicting the EU as an oppressive force from which the UK needs to break free, this frame evokes a sense of both heroism and conflict invoking the emotional resonance that we have referred to in the previous section.

Finally, Landmann and Ganz (2023) have analysed the “cliff edge” metaphor, which was used to describe the potential disastrous outcomes of a no-deal Brexit. When we think of someone skating on thin ice on the edge of a cliff, the feeling of imminent danger is sudden and strong; this frame conveyed both the sense of a precarious balance throughout the negotiations as well as that of the possible catastrophic consequences of falling off the metaphorical cliff of a ‘hard’ Brexit, by eliciting in the audience the visceral fear of falling. The image of Brexit as “standing at the edge of a cliff” highlights the critical nature of the decisions being made, and the fact that these would affect the population itself, by conveying to the audience a sense of urgency and risk involved in the negotiations.

Building on this literature, in the following section we will introduce a novel frame: the Brexit ticking clock. To our knowledge, this frame and its sub-metaphors have not been described in prior studies of Brexit framing.

#### **4. Case Study: The Brexit Ticking Clock**

In this section we examine a set of metaphors recurrently employed in the media coverage of Brexit that share a common source domain: A TICKING CLOCK. Much like the previously discussed SHIP IN A STORM, the ticking clock operates as a culturally salient image, immediately accessible to the audience because it translates the abstract temporality of negotiations into concrete, embodied experience. Its productivity lies in the fact that it can be adapted to different communicative agendas, generating frames that resonate with both “leave” and “remain” narratives. A large number of headlines employing this metaphor (and the sub-metaphors connected to it) were found; only a representative selection is presented here to illustrate the main patterns of use.

#### 4.1 *Running down the clock*

One of the earliest and most frequent uses of this metaphor was the idiom ‘to run down the clock’, which began circulating in 2019 while Prime Minister Theresa May was leading negotiations with the EU. The expression originates in the sports domain, where it describes a defensive strategy: deliberately consuming the remaining time of a match by holding the ball so as to deny the opponent further opportunities to score. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it means “to try to reduce the time that remains available to the opposition in a sports match, for example by keeping possession of the ball” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.):

- (1) Britain running down the clock in Britain talks, says Michel Barnier.<sup>1</sup>
- (2) May has run down the Brexit clock. It must be stopped.<sup>2</sup>
- (3) May promises further Brexit votes amid claims she is ‘running down the clock’.<sup>3</sup>
- (4) Brexit: Theresa May told not to ‘run down clock’ on deal.<sup>4</sup>

In example (1), the choice of subject (Britain) shifts agency from May to the collective nation, widening responsibility for the delay and framing stalling as a national strategy rather than an individual one. Example (2) employs the present perfect aspect (has run down) to construe the action as already accomplished, which heightens the sense of urgency and foregrounds the need for immediate intervention. In example (3), the idiom appears within quotation marks as a scare quotation (Fetzer, 2024), which can signal distancing or attribution. In fact, this usage marks the expression as reported speech rather than the journalist’s own voice, indicating that “running down the clock” circulated as an evaluative label within the political debate itself. Finally, example (4) reports a directive addressed to May, which frames the discourse as a prescriptive act of admonition and reinforces its performative force.

<sup>1</sup> The Guardian. 2020. Retrieved March 02, 2024 from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/apr/24/britain-running-down-the-clock-in-brexit-talks-says-michel-barnier-eu>

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian. 2019. Retrieved March 02, 2024 from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/02/theresa-may-brexit-article-50-general-election-labour>

<sup>3</sup> Daily Mail. 2019. Retrieved March 03, 2024 from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-6688075/May-promises-Brexit-votes-amid-claims-running-clock.html>

<sup>4</sup> BBC News. 2019. Retrieved March 03, 2024 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-46577359>

Taken together, these headlines show the different ways in which a sports idiom was recontextualised as a political weapon. The sub-metaphor portrays May's reluctance to present her deal to Parliament as a defensive strategy, similar to holding the ball while the clock ticks down to the end of a game. This framing invites the audience to perceive her as seeking advantage by exhausting time, yet simultaneously exposes her as passive and evasive - an image reinforced by the possibility of a no-deal ("hard") Brexit, as suggested in Example 2. The idiom therefore combines two layers of meaning: on the one hand, it casts May as the side less affected by a negative outcome, but on the other, it depicts her as engaging in a strategy that could ultimately lead to loss.

By translating procedural delay into an iconic scene of time-wasting on the playing field, the metaphor makes the abstract temporality of Brexit negotiations experientially vivid. Its circulation across both "remain" and "leave" narratives underscores its rhetorical flexibility: each side could adapt the idiom to talk about May's leadership from its own perspective. In this way, running down the clock anchored public perceptions of Brexit in the iconic image of a game inexorably moving toward conclusion, while the key player refused to act.

#### *4.2 The ticking time bomb*

As the Brexit clock metaphor developed, it often intensified into the image of a ticking time bomb. This sub-metaphor shifts the frame from competitive play to imminent catastrophe: time is not simply being consumed but is counting down toward an inevitable explosion. In this way, the idiom escalates the affective force of the ticking clock, foregrounding anxiety and fear. The following examples illustrate this pattern:

- (5) The Brexit clock is ticking. Will it be a time bomb?<sup>5</sup>
- (6) Clock ticking towards 'nightmare Brexit scenario'. Border Communities Against Brexit unveiled a countdown clock at the Irish border.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The Irish Times. 2017. Retrieved March 07, 2024 from <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/the-brexit-clock-is-ticking-will-it-be-a-time-bomb-1.3033930>

<sup>6</sup> Belfast Telegraph. 2019. Retrieved March 01, 2024 from <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/republic-of-ireland/clock-ticking-towards-nightmare-brexit-scenario/37948091.html>

- (7) The Brexit time bomb.<sup>7</sup>
- (8) Feet up, mug of tea in hand and...breathe. Time to tick Brexit off your worries list? Don't you believe it, because among the devilish details (most of which present more difficulties than impossibilities, thereby still eating time and expense) lurks a ticking time bomb that threatens to destabilise the UK car industry unless urgent action is taken.<sup>8</sup>
- (9) Clock ticking towards 'kamikaze' Brexit, TUC general secretary says.<sup>9</sup>
- (10) Big Ben silenced – but Brexit clocks are ticking.<sup>10</sup>
- (11) EU exit campaigners warn of eurozone 'ticking time bomb'.<sup>11</sup>

In example (5), the interrogative clause “Will it be a time bomb?” maintains a residual openness: while the clock is ticking, the destructive outcome is not yet presupposed. By contrast, example (6) combines the progressive form “is ticking towards” with the phrase “nightmare scenario”, reinforcing inevitability and the impossibility of escape, while connotating the countdown in a negative way. The events described in this headline also demonstrate how powerfully the frame was spinning in public discourse at the time: the metaphorical countdown was no longer confined to language but was materialised in real life through the unveiling of an actual countdown clock at the Irish border. The shift from mental image to physical enactment underlines the iconic force of the metaphor and its capacity to shape collective perception. Example (7) reduces the metaphor to a bare nominalisation “The Brexit time bomb”, condensing the crisis into a static label that leaves no interpretive alternative. The descriptive image of domestic calm (“Feet up, mug of tea in hand”) found in example (8) is abruptly overturned by the “lurking ticking time bomb”, rhetorically dramatising hidden danger through juxtaposition.

<sup>7</sup> European Policy Centre. 2020. Retrieved March 24, 2024 from <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/The-Brexit-time-bomb-352960>

<sup>8</sup> Autocar UK. 2021. Retrieved March 20, 2024 from <https://www.autocar.co.uk/car-news/business-tech,-development-and-manufacturing/inside-industry-why-rule-origin-brexit-time>

<sup>9</sup> Daily Mail. 2017. Retrieved March 03, 2024 from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-4869964/Clock-ticking-kamikaze-Brexit-TUC-general-secretary-says.html>

<sup>10</sup> BBC. 2018. Retrieved March 03, 2024 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-46524579>

<sup>11</sup> BBC. 2016. Retrieved March 03, 2024 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36029860>

The last three examples go in slightly different directions: we find the addition of “kamikaze” in example (9), which introduces connotations of self-destruction and deliberate sacrifice, making the threat appear self-inflicted. Then, example (10) extends the metaphor metonymically by linking it to Big Ben, a cultural landmark that embodies both timekeeping and national identity, thus materialising the countdown in a tangible symbol cherished by the audience.

Finally, example (11) shows the metaphor’s flexibility: originally prominent in the “remain” discourse, the time bomb frame is here taken by “leave” campaigners, who project the imagery of impending explosion onto the eurozone instead of Brexit itself. Yet even in this recontextualised use, the structure of the metaphor remains unchanged: the countdown leads to a deflagration, and thus to destruction. In contrast to other frames exploited by both narratives the time bomb does not allow for a positive resolution. Its endpoint is always catastrophic, which makes it distinctive among the images circulating in the Brexit debate.

This discourse around Brexit shifts the meaning of “time” from neutral chronology to lethal threat. Progressive forms (i.e., ‘is ticking towards’) construe the explosion as an inevitable process already underway, while phrases like ‘time bomb’ crystallise the threat into an entity beyond human control. Pragmatically, the use of this metaphor functions as a warning, positioning the audience as witnesses to a countdown that demands urgent response, heightening affective engagement by invoking fear, anxiety, and even horror (as in kamikaze).

This discursive escalation turns the ticking clock from a contested strategy into a fatal inevitability. Compared to running down the clock, which still allowed for tactical management of time, the time bomb leaves no possibility of control: once set, it can only detonate.

#### *4.3 The countdown and the reboot*

While the time bomb metaphor remained tied to destruction, the broader ticking clock frame also generated positive reinterpretations, particularly in pro-leave discourse. Here the countdown does not lead to catastrophe but to renewal, a re-framing that inverts the negativity of the bomb image.

(12) Countdown clock to be projected onto Number 10 to mark Brexit day.<sup>12</sup>

(13) General election in 2019: ‘We can use Brexit to reboot the UK’.<sup>13</sup>

In Example (12), the metaphor is enacted materially: a countdown clock is physically projected onto the Prime Minister’s residence, transforming what was previously a mental image into a real-world spectacle. This iconic realisation not only makes the metaphor tangible but also invites associations with culturally familiar rituals, such as the New Year’s Eve countdown. The temporal threshold thus becomes celebratory rather than destructive. In Example (13), the language of reboot borrows from technological discourse, construing Brexit as a system restart. Here the clock does not lead to an explosion but to a new beginning, a chance to clear away past failures and start afresh.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate how the same ticking clock frame could be re-spun into a positive scenario. Semantically, this countdown signals anticipation rather than danger. Furthermore, the projection of the clock at Number 10 stages Brexit as a collective performance of waiting, culminating in a shared moment of arrival. The image provides “leave” supporters with a powerful inversion of the remainers’ catastrophic frame: instead of detonating, the clock ushers in celebration and renewal.

In fact, unlike the time bomb, whose endpoint is always deflagration and destruction, the countdown/reboot frame offers a hopeful resolution. This contrast shows the versatility of the ticking clock metaphor in Brexit discourse: it could anchor fear of collapse or promise national rebirth, depending on the side deploying it.

## 5. Conclusions

The study of the Brexit clock has shown more metaphors that have surrounded this topic of public discourse in the past ten years. The major frame of Brexit as a ticking clock has been used by different media in various produc-

<sup>12</sup> ITV. 2020. Retrieved March 27, 2024 from <https://www.itv.com/news/2020-01-17/countdown-clock-to-be-projected-onto-number-10-to-mark-brexit-day>

<sup>13</sup> BBC News. 2019. Retrieved March 03, 2024 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-scotland-50674511>

tive ways, and the semantic field related to time and clocks has been extrapolated to create even more metaphors, that have been used to build different frames around the issue and put forth different perspectives. The use of devices that consciously or unconsciously help the audience feel abstract events as part of their everyday life facilitates the spread of frames in public discourse by making complex political issues relatable and emotionally charged. These metaphors did not just inform but they also affected how people felt about Brexit, acting like lenses that colour the public's perception of it. The vivid imagery and emotional depth they provide not only make the discourse more engaging but also more memorable, ensuring that these frames have a lasting impact on public attitudes and discussions.

The framing devices presented enhance the persuasiveness of the media's message by aligning the Brexit experience with common human experiences, making the content more likely to be accepted and spread. Additionally, each metaphor is designed to trigger specific emotions and feelings such as fear, anxiety, anticipation, urgency and resilience, and these emotional charges enhance their memorability. The more an audience can relate to the metaphor through personal experience, the more likely they are to remember and recount the framed narrative. In fact, the spread of these metaphorically rich frames is further facilitated by their resonance with the audience's everyday experiences and emotions.

To tangibly see the impact of such iconic devices on the development and successful spread of a frame, it is sufficient to notice the difference between saying *time is passing by* and *the clock is ticking* or, again, between *Brexit could have bad repercussions on the UK* and *Brexit is a time bomb*. While they share the same underlying meaning, the first instances of these two pairs remain abstract, the second ones immediately make one's mind picture something clear and tangible: a clock ticking, a bomb and with them all the emotions that the encyclopaedic knowledge of these two object brings forward. It's a tale as old as time, as Lakoff (2004) would say: *Don't think of the elephant*. This concrete resonance ensures that the frames are easily communicated and understood even by those with little political expertise, thus enhancing their accessibility. It has to be noted that the nature of these frames also gives them a higher potential to go viral on social media, spreading rapidly

as people share content that resonates with them on a personal and emotional level. In fact, the iconic strength of these metaphors makes them easily shareable on platforms where pictures are more important than words, while still spinning the same frame, making it stronger. Beyond confirming the persuasive force of framing devices, this analysis expands the literature by bringing to light the ticking clock and its sub-metaphors, which had not been systematically examined in earlier studies of Brexit discourse. Their inclusion broadens the map of available metaphorical resources and shows how iconic and embodied imagery can generate both negative and positive framings of the same event.

Finally, looking ahead, it seems crucial to ask: How volatile are these metaphors? Are they still relevant in describing the post-Brexit reality, or have new metaphors emerged to reflect the current situation? A strong advantage of these metaphors might lie in their adaptability as well as their embodiment in public consciousness. For instance, the *divorce* metaphor can continue to frame discussions about the long-term effects of Brexit, assessing whether the nation is thriving post-divorce or facing challenges. While iconicity plays a crucial role in the spread of frames, would it be enough for granting the persistence and evolution of these metaphors in the public discourse? In future research, by analysing the current media products on this topic, we might understand why some metaphors persist while others fade in the framing process of events.

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## Appendix A. More headlines exemplifying the ‘Brexit ticking clock’ frame

Headline/[Extract]	Reference
Theresa May heckled as she denies ‘running down the clock’ on Brexit	Sky News. 2019, February 12. Retrieved March 15, 2024 from <a href="https://news.sky.com/story/theresa-may-heckled-as-she-denies-running-down-the-clock-on-brexit-11635476">https://news.sky.com/story/theresa-may-heckled-as-she-denies-running-down-the-clock-on-brexit-11635476</a>
With 100 days to go before Brexit, Theresa May is running out the clock. [Tick bloody tock]	The Washington Post. 2018, December 19. Retrieved March 15, 2024 from <a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/with-100-days-to-go-before-brexit-theresa-may-is-running-out-the-clock/2018/12/19/7a44adc6-021c-11e9-958c-0a601226ff6b_story.html">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/with-100-days-to-go-before-brexit-theresa-may-is-running-out-the-clock/2018/12/19/7a44adc6-021c-11e9-958c-0a601226ff6b_story.html</a>
Brexit delayed — but still the clock is ticking. [The battle over the EU divorce deal has eclipsed other issues]	Church Times. 2019, March 29. Retrieved March 16, 2024 from <a href="https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/29-march/comment/opinion/brexit-delayed-but-still-the-clock-is-ticking">https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/29-march/comment/opinion/brexit-delayed-but-still-the-clock-is-ticking</a>
‘The clock is ticking’: EU warns Britain of poor Brexit progress	Reuters. 2018, May 14. Retrieved March 14, 2024 from <a href="https://www.yahoo.com/news/clock-ticking-eu-tells-brexit-britain-120405605.html">https://www.yahoo.com/news/clock-ticking-eu-tells-brexit-britain-120405605.html</a>
Michel Barnier: ‘I am not hearing any whistling, just a clock ticking’	The Guardian. 2017, July 12. Retrieved March 14, 2024 from <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/global/video/2017/jul/12/michel-barnier-i-am-not-hearing-any-whistling-just-a-clock-ticking-video">https://www.theguardian.com/global/video/2017/jul/12/michel-barnier-i-am-not-hearing-any-whistling-just-a-clock-ticking-video</a>
The clock is no longer ticking – Christmas Eve 2020	Cicero Group / TISA. 2020, December 24. Retrieved March 14, 2024 from <a href="https://www.tisa.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Brexit-Deal-2020_Cicero.pdf">https://www.tisa.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Brexit-Deal-2020_Cicero.pdf</a>
Experts warn over ‘ticking time bomb’ post-Brexit rights scheme for EU nationals	PoliticsHome. 2018, November 12. Retrieved March 12, 2024 from <a href="https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/excl-experts-warn-over-ticking-time-bomb-postbrexit-rights-scheme-for-eu-nationals">https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/excl-experts-warn-over-ticking-time-bomb-postbrexit-rights-scheme-for-eu-nationals</a>
The new Brexit time bomb	The New World. 2024, December 03. Retrieved September 02, 2025 from <a href="https://www.thenewworld.co.uk/the-new-brexit-time-bomb">https://www.thenewworld.co.uk/the-new-brexit-time-bomb</a>
Revocation time-bomb in UK and EU trade mark system	Mills & Reeve. 2025, February 11. Retrieved September 02, 2025 from <a href="https://www.mills-reeve.com/publications/revocation-time-bomb-in-uk-and-eu-trade-mark-system">https://www.mills-reeve.com/publications/revocation-time-bomb-in-uk-and-eu-trade-mark-system</a>

Britain's briefcase-toting envoy delivers Brexit timebomb	Yahoo News (via AFP). 2017, March 29. Retrieved March 11, 2024 from <a href="https://sg.news.yahoo.com/britains-briefcase-toting-envoy-delivers-brexit-timebomb-153346197.html">https://sg.news.yahoo.com/britains-briefcase-toting-envoy-delivers-brexit-timebomb-153346197.html</a>
Countdown to Brexit: the key dates as UK's EU exit approaches	The Guardian. 2019, February 08. Retrieved March 12, 2024 from <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/feb/08/countdown-to-brexit-key-dates-uk-eu-exit-approaches">https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/feb/08/countdown-to-brexit-key-dates-uk-eu-exit-approaches</a>
Brexit countdown: what happens next and what you need to know	Financial Times. 2019, April 11. Retrieved March 13, 2024 from <a href="https://ig.ft.com/brexit-countdown">https://ig.ft.com/brexit-countdown</a>
'Get Ready for Brexit': government launches information blitz	The Guardian. 2019, September 02. Retrieved March 12, 2024 from <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/02/get-ready-for-brexit-government-launches-information-blitz">https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/02/get-ready-for-brexit-government-launches-information-blitz</a>
Get ready for the impossible: Brexit ads still counting down	The Guardian. 2019, October 25. Retrieved March 13, 2024 from <a href="https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/oct/25/get-ready-for-the-impossible-brexit-ads-still-counting-down">https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/oct/25/get-ready-for-the-impossible-brexit-ads-still-counting-down</a>
[Daily Mail: Zero hour: Downing St countdown clock shows moment we left the EU for good]	European Journalism Observatory. 2020, March 03. Retrieved March 12, 2024 from <a href="https://en.ejo.ch/media-politics/sad-farewell-or-new-dawn-europes-media-reflect-on-brexit-day">https://en.ejo.ch/media-politics/sad-farewell-or-new-dawn-europes-media-reflect-on-brexit-day</a>
[Pro-Brexit demonstrators celebrated on Parliament Square as the countdown clock hit zero]	Al Jazeera. 2020, February 01. Retrieved March 13, 2024 from <a href="https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/1/brexit-uk-officially-leaves-the-european-union">https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/1/brexit-uk-officially-leaves-the-european-union</a>
Countdown to Brexit times out as UK enters 'new chapter' outside European Union	ABC7 Chicago / CNN. 2021, January 01. Retrieved March 15, 2024 from <a href="https://abc7chicago.com/brexit-countdown-to-boris-johnson-uk/9254640">https://abc7chicago.com/brexit-countdown-to-boris-johnson-uk/9254640</a>
[A countdown clock, projected onto the prime minister's residence ... marked the final minutes of the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union]	Vox. 2020, January 31. Retrieved March 15, 2024 from <a href="https://www.vox.com/2020/1/31/21083573/brexit-news-boris-johnson-timeline-eu-uk">https://www.vox.com/2020/1/31/21083573/brexit-news-boris-johnson-timeline-eu-uk</a>

