COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Brexit and female leadership in Spanish digital media from a linguistic perspective. The case of Theresa May's decline

Abstract

The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (broadly known as Brexit) is one of the most outstanding historical events of the 21st Century to date. Two major figures have led this process politically: Theresa May and Boris Johnson, the two Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom since 2016. This paper, however, focuses on the former, as she is a female politician in a controversial situation, and thus the way she is presented can serve an example of how women in power are represented by the media. This research was designed with the aim of discovering the roles attributed to Theresa May by Spanish digital media throughout this process. The fact that people in Spain are becoming deeply concerned with women's advances in society was motivated the desire to test how Spanish media represent female leaders, such as May. To complete this study, fifty-four publications from three different Spanish digital media leaders of audience (*El Mundo, El País* and *El Español*) were taken as a reference. The methodological procedure used was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), based on semantic relationships, and although some comparisons between relative and absolute frequencies were made, the general approach is basically qualitative. Through this analysis, it has been discovered that Theresa May is presented in a different way depending on the remaining characters, usually masculine, who participate in the action. These differences are mainly observable between those articles in which May relates to her European counterparts and those in which she deals with her British colleagues.

Keywords
Brexit, female leadership, Theresa May, Critical Discourse Analysis, Digital Media, Linguistics, Semantics.

1. Introduction and research aims

Brexit can be considered as one of the most important events in the history of Europe so far this century. The decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union (EU) is a turning point for the whole of the EU. During the process of separation, which had its starting point in the 2016 referendum, several people have led the United Kingdom to its EU farewell. Among them, there is one who deserves special attention. This is Theresa May, the UK Prime Minister

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(2016-2019), who first started the process of withdrawing from the EU, and who has made a firm commitment to that exit.

She represents leadership at a critical point for the United Kingdom and for the European Union with her well-known sentence: 'Brexit means Brexit'.

Theresa May has been a member of the British Parliament since 1997, she was Minister of the Interior and Minister of Women and Equality before succeeding David Cameron as Chief Executive. She arrived at Downing Street on July 13, 2016, becoming the second woman to hold the position of British Prime Minister after another female Conservative, Margaret Thatcher. Since becoming chief executive, her main mission was to deal with European Union (EU), trying to obtain the most beneficial agreement possible for her country. Invoking Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon, on March 29, 2017, May sent to Brussels the six-page letter that constituted the formal request to leave the Community club. After almost two years of talks with the EU and three failed parliamentary votes in the British House of Commons (the Lower House), May announced her resignation on May 24, 2019 and she finally left office on June 7 of that year.

In Spain, politicians and the media adopted an anti-Brexit position. An analysis based on the news offered by 39 media from different EU member countries, the Reuters Institute concluded that Spain is one of the countries (together with Greece) whose media expressed a strong view against Brexit (Borchardt, Simon & Bironzo, 2018). In the midst of concerns about the independence movement in Catalonia, these authors believe that the strong anti-Brexit sentiment shown in the Spanish press can be explained by the fear of contagion in the aspirations of Catalan independence supporters, if Brexiteers were finally successful.

This research has gone through a study of the representation that the Spanish digital press offered of Theresa May since her leadership began to be questioned, with the first rejection of the British House of Commons to the Brexit plan dealt by May. In keeping with the premise on which Critical Discourse studies are based, these publications reveal the beliefs and attitudes of the individuals who produce them.

Thus, the study starts with the objective of understanding the treatment given by the main Spanish digital media to the leadership of a female figure of the importance of Theresa May. The study focuses on the period of decline of her leadership, so that the role attributed to the British leader in the failure of the Brexit negotiations is especially explored.

Since, as indicated above, the vision of the Spanish media regarding Brexit is negative, our intention is to check whether the role attributed to May differs depending on whether it is presented in relation to her British analogues, supporters of Brexit, or with her European analogues, opposed to it.

The research questions are as follows:

- What kind of representation did the Spanish press offer of Theresa May and the failure of her leadership? Are the roles assigned to May different when she is represented in the European context as opposed to the British one?
- Does the representation made of Theresa May by the Spanish press promote the normalization of female leadership or contribute to perpetuating an image incompatible with political leadership?
- What linguistic-discursive resources does the Spanish press use to represent Theresa May's leadership in a positive/negative way?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. *Female leadership and media representation*

Equality as a driver of social change is one of the great concerns of this century. International institutions such as the United Nations (UN) or those of the European Union (EU) wish to

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create spaces and policies that contribute to improving the role of women in society. In this sense, media are of great relevance:

> Femininity, as well as masculinity, are not biological, but rather, cultural constructs. Representations and manifestations of femininity differ across cultures, time and societies. Femininity is culturally and socially constructed by the family, education, the public, and to a larger extent, the media. In this respect, the long-term change in women's images in media could help change the perceptions and stereotypes women face in a society (Davtyan-Gevorgyan, 2016, para. 5.).

There are currently a number of groups carrying out research which has women at the centre. These studies are mostly related to women as a homogeneous set of individuals, and when reviewing the presence of women in the media, they tend to see the reality of women in the press, and there are many proposals which analyse coverage of violence against women (Sánchez Rodríguez, 2008), or the discrimination that women as a group suffer for reasons of sex, race, work, etc. (Pineda, 2016).

For now, the research undertaken into female leadership in the media has been limited to the study of the framework (García Beaudoux, 2014), or to the specific analysis of successful women in the areas of sport or politics in Spain, using retrospective analysis (Sánchez Calero *et al.*, 2013).

Women have traditionally been represented in the media with a series of attributes that have little to do with those commonly associated with leadership, and the social image attributed to the female gender has seen them reduced to a secondary role in public and private environments, with lesser roles, a long way from a reinforced social image (Davtyan-Gevorgyan, 2016). In fact, until 2017, the dictionary of the RAE (Royal Academy of the Spanish Language) still contained a definition that considered women as the *weaker sex*, a definition that still exists in a pejorative sense.

Camps (1998) pointed out an important social change: the representative presence of women in positions of leadership; one of the most important landmarks of the feminist movement, and in the end, for working women.

The social change Camps refers to has continued in recent decades, and an increasing number of women are in responsible posts within public institutions and private companies in all sectors.

The media, as creators of public opinion, and indeed of social awareness, play an essential role in achieving a normalization of female leadership, and the perception by society that this is a reality and not the exception.

The research, in this sense, has started to take some early steps, although its recency does not allow the studies in this area to be truly consolidated.

Güney, Gohar, Akinci & Akinci (2006, p. 398) try to break down some of the stereotypes which distance women from positions of responsibility, such as, for example, that "women are not suited to posts of great responsibility because they are too emotional and lack aggression."

Kiamba (2008) states that, traditionally, leadership has carried overtones of masculinity, and that the belief that men are better leaders than women was still, at the start of the century, quite entrenched.

Focusing on the role of the communications media in consolidating female leadership, we found some studies to serve as a foundation for our own.

Among the most recent and exhaustive studies, that carried out in 2011 by Jaworska and Larrivée, with the title "Women, power and the media: Assessing the bias," is especially noteworthy. This study underlines the fact that, with the entry of women into the realm of politics, the traditional conventions that considered womanhood to be incompatible with political leadership have been rearranged. Among the conclusions of the study, Jaworska and

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Larrivée identified successful women with a series of characteristics habitually attributed to men.

Another interesting approach from Critical Discourse Analysis, feminist in this case, is used by Clare Walsh, in her 2015 paper, "Media capital or media deficit? Representations of women in leadership roles in old and new media." This study underlines the need to continue researching the differences between the traditional and the newer media, and warns about limited and limiting perceptions which, aided by the media, circulate in public.

The medium that has most commonly contributed to the creation of social images and the perpetuation of the female image is television, which is also the case of women in positions of leadership, as seen in the research of García Beaudoux (2014), which proposes the need for a tactic of reframing political communication as a way of showing up gender stereotypes in news items related to women in positions of leadership, and thus contribute to social change.

Most of these studies have looked at women who have been in important positions in politics, such as that of García Jiménez *et al.* (2008) on the representation of female politicians in the media, concluding that, despite the ongoing social transformation, some of these gender stereotypes still exist. It also pointed out that there are still many lines of work to be studied in greater depth. A similar study is that of Trimble (2007) in Canada, which reminds us that news items in the media are the lens through which citizens see politicians in action, and it concludes that the relation between gender and media visibility is complex and complicated.

In the case of Belgium, the study carried out by Hooghe, Jacobs & Claes (2015) focuses on the analysis of factors which contribute to members of parliament, men and women, having a place in television discourse, and among its conclusions is the persistence of a lower representation of female politicians, who not only appear on fewer occasions than their male colleagues, but the time given over to their speeches is also much less. This research points to the persistence of inequality in the means of communication despite the direction of travel of the political system being towards equality.

Some of the studies have focused on women who have served as icons of female leadership, such as the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Quevedo and Suárez-Romero (2016) performed a content analysis on pictures published in five respected Spanish daily newspapers, to determine the projection given to the German leader, and concluded that the attributes associated with the image of Angela Merkel would not be the same in the case of a male leader.

Most of the studies carried out up to now focus on comparisons between the masculine and the feminine, or the search for elements which confirmed the gender stereotypes, and they were carried out using elements of study in traditional media, perhaps because breakthroughs in this area are very recent.

However, there is considerable scope for this research, especially in the media, as no exhaustive analysis of publications related to female leadership, the language used, the roles or characteristics attributed to them or the image transmitted has yet been carried out. Also, beyond the methodologies used in previous work, it is necessary to perform an analysis of the attributes shown in these areas, and of how they contribute to the creation of the social image of women in positions of leadership and responsibility.

Bearing in mind, furthermore, that the web is global, the analysis of this type of publication in the media needs to consider the international dimension. It should also be borne in mind that analysis of these texts requires a cross-sectional and multidisciplinary approach to enable comparison and understanding of the overall phenomenon, using fields of study such as history, sociology and linguistic pragmatics, among others.

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2.2. *Brexit, Theresa May and media representation*

Brexit represents a clear inflection point for the European Union (EU) and its members. Politically, it is the first time in its history that a member country leaves the select club, and socially it remains as a warning of the opposition of part of the public opinion with the way of organizing the European Union. For the first time in its history, there was a great number of people that preferred being out and who would fight strongly to achieve it. Brexit has also been interpreted as part of an international populist backlash against Europeanization (Calhoun, 2017).

To explain the historically complex relationship between the United Kingdom and the so called 'Continent' through the analysis of political discourse, Maccaferri (2019) suggests that besides a rejection of austerity policies and globalisation, one of the main causes of the Brexit sentiment has been the existence of Eurosceptic discourses surrounding the United Kingdom since the 1960s decade.

Brexit is one of the examples of how discursive strategies used by the media can serve an ideological struggle, in this particular case, to legitimise the Brexit.

> In taking into account all these discursive dynamics, one can hardly underestimate the role of the media in (re)producing and framing such discourses as well as creating wider path-dependencies eventually followed by the wider social and political discourse (Zappetini & Krzyźanowski, 2019, p. 382).

This fact, which had its main expression in the UK, has divided the British media into those defending the updating of EU institutions, and that remaining in this alliance has no advantages, and those promoting EU membership as the best way of keeping peace, safety and social justice for people.

However, in other countries, such as Spain, media and opinion leaders have been very deeply concerned with European membership. The position adopted was, mainly, anti-Brexit and consequently, they criticized openly the United Kingdom decision. This was also extended to the leaders of this process and all the politicians leading it. Among them, and maybe the two most outstanding characters, Theresa May and Boris Johnson.

The role of Theresa May has been essential for the development of Brexit, even though she was not able to complete the whole procedure. The former Prime Minister was seen as strong minded, committed to dealing with the way United Kingdom citizens had answered to the referendum, as she shows in her speech:

> A little over 6 months ago, the British people voted for change. They voted to shape a brighter future for our country. They voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world. [...] That means more than negotiating our new relationship with the EU. It means taking the opportunity of this great moment of national change to step back and ask ourselves what kind of country we want to be (May, 2017).

In a very different political, social and historical context, Theresa May's way of playing her political role has sometimes compared with that of Margaret Thatcher, '*the Iron Lady.'* They have both often been presented as traditional conservative leaders, with a strong commitment to their country and a great determination to achieve their goals. This is due, in part, to the image of May offered by the British media, which aims to establish a relationship between these politicians because of their common gender.

In Spain, however, every issue related to Brexit has been seen as a lack of commitment to the common project established in the European Union, and so, the actors involved in this process have not been well received. Spanish media have frequently used the idea of a metaphorical divorce between United Kingdom and the European Union. Being members of this club, Spanish media have often represented the UK as leaving us after a long and productive relationship.

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The process leaders have been sometimes caricatured and shown as guilty of a situation that was undesirable for most European countries. The resignation of Theresa May as Prime Minister resulted in the threat of a no-deal Brexit, and she was presented as unable to reach her objectives. However, as soon as Boris Johnson arrived in Downing Street with his strong personality, May has entirely disappeared from Spanish media coverage.

2.3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis, or critical discourse studies, was born from criticisms of the foundations of modernity and the idea of objectivity and the positivist tendency which has configured our knowledge, belief system and values, uses of history and language. This criticism called into question the foundational status attributed to certain stories that have shaped modern thinking (Laclau, 1996). Indeed, doubt was cast on the historically predominant stories by postmodern critics, who began uncovering limitations of the project of modernity regarding the nature of reality.

In the midst of this criticism is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) or Critical Studies of Discourse (CSD) as some prefer to call it (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; van Dijk, 2009; Pardo, 2011), a branch of discourse analysis that arose from the proposal of a series of academics (van Dijk, 1980; Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 1989; Kress & Leeuwen, 1996) interested in the social aspect of discourse, which are nourished by the contributions of different disciplines: rhetoric, textual linguistics, anthropology, social psychology, literary studies, cognitive, as well as pragmatic and applied linguistics.

Fairclough, one of its sponsors, in his work Language and Power (1989), states that language is connected with the social, since it is the primary domain of ideology. Language is the place par excellence in which ideology is perceived and, therefore, where power struggles have a place. Although there are different approaches in the ECD, this interest in social matters means that everyone shares a series of characteristics (see Wodak, 2005; van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Within the Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this research is based on the socio-cognitive approach (van Dijk, 2012), which tries to relate the linguistic-discursive structures with the attitudes of social groups through cognition. By tracing the discursive structures, and especially the semantic and rhetorical aspects, you can come to understand the mental models that individuals define and that influence their attitudes and behaviours towards specific causes or characters.

Van Dijk (1977, 1978, 1980) first used the term *macrostructure*, which refers to the global semantic sense of the text and which is specified in the topics he deals with. The macrostructure is constituted thanks to sentence sequences that summarize the main semantic content of a fragment with a thematic unity and it is called *macropropositions*. In addition, the study of the semantic level includes attention to the microstructure in search of metaphors or associations that reveal beliefs not clearly explained by the authors.

Finally, within the CDA frame, van Leeuwen (1996) considers social actors as protagonists of social practices. That is, individuals, groups, organizations or communities standing out in social life and taking part in the cultural, social and political processes of a limited society. The Dutch author indicates that the representation (positive, negative or neutral) of the main characters in any text can be traced through discursive analysis and offers a classification according to the actions attributed to them: benefactor/malefactor, accomplice/non-accomplice, debtor/creditor or beneficiary/victim.

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3. Methodology

3.1. *Sample selection procedure*

The main interest of this research aims to picture a general overview of Theresa May's representation in Spanish digital media. This is a broad area and so, a narrower selection had to be done. This research was designed as mainly qualitative, with some numerical comparisons as a result of the analysis completed, but it does not aim to be representative of all the Spanish digital media, as the sample needed would be too varied to cope with.

However, the selection procedure has been randomised and balanced between different media and paying attention to the representativeness of media chosen in Spanish digital media environment.

To do this research, 54 news and opinion articles from*: El País*, *El Mundo* and *El Español* were selected and fully analysed. Since the aim of the study is to better understand the representation of Theresa May leadership by the Spanish press as a whole, the three specific newspapers were chosen according to their popularity and varied ideological affinity. *El País* and *El Mundo* have traditionally been the most read Spanish newspapers in both their printed and digital versions whereas *El Español* was the most popular digital Spanish newspaper in 2019, according to the advertising market reference site *Comscore*.

Following the data available from OJD, those three media have the highest number of online readings in Spain, focusing on national media and ignoring regional newspapers.

Figure 1: Number of monthly visitors in Spain.

Newspaper	El Español	El Mundo	El País
Number of visitors/month (Dec 2019)	11,500,000	21,000,000	20,700,000

Source: OJD.

Although those newspapers proclaim their independence from different power structures, traditionally *El País* has been related to a centre-left ideology whereas *El Mundo* and *El Español* have been linked to a centre-right ideology. The selection of journalistic pieces to constitute the corpus is based on the most relevant search results by the name and surname of the protagonist, Theresa May. Thus, the corpus analysed is all strictly related to Brexit and Theresa May appeared as the main, or at least, one of the main actors.

In the selection of the corpus, profile or opinion articles related to the British leader have also been included, with the aim of finding the most subjective discourse of the journalist, a richer interpretation and assessment of the actions undertaken by the protagonist and a deeper description of her personality.

The corpus chosen to perform the discursive analysis is that of articles appearing in the three newspapers mentioned, between January 15, 2019 and October 31, 2019. The first date was chosen because that was the day on which the House of Commons of the United Kingdom voted against the agreement on Brexit that May's executive had previously negotiated with the European Union. The end date is the day of publication of the last opinion article so far found with a direct mention of Theresa May in its headline "Johnson impoverishes us more than May" (*El País*). In this way, the period corresponding to May's decline as a political leader is covered, and so is the representation of her leadership in the Spanish digital press.

3.2. *Categorization and sample analysis*

Once the sample was collected, there was a second stage, the identification of macropropositions (or global semantic propositions) which contain the main semantic information of the micropropositions (or local sentences which constitute a text) (van Dijk, 1977, 1980). Macropropositions are obtained thanks to cognitive processes of abstraction and generalization that allow a coherent and summarized interpretation of the micropropositions.

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Thus, these macropropositions have also been grouped according to topics, so that the predominance of the issues around which the representation of the British leader is structured can be better understood. This also allows discovery of the roles assigned to her in each of the topics identified.

The roles attributed to Theresa May are derived from the analysis of each of the macropropositions and follow van Leeuwen's taxonomy (1996) of social actors. This author describes different categories to represent the social actors of the discourse as well as a series of attributes or roles that can be assigned to them, such as Benefactor/Defender/Malefactor, when their actions entail benefits or damages to others, Victim/Beneficiary, when they are benefited or harmed by the actions of others. Social actors' attributes and roles are derived from the application of lexical–semantic analysis to macropropositions.

To establish the proportion of occurrence of each role, the number of macropropositions in which that role appears was multiplied by the total number of macropropositions analysed and this result was then divided by a hundred.

To complete the discourse analysis carried out in this study, attention was also paid to the microstructure of the text, to find other semantic and pragmatic elements, such as metaphors, associations, implications and presuppositions associated with the figure of Theresa May.

As a possible limitation to this research, it must be taken into account that only those macropropositions that could be of interest to the study wereanalysed. For this reason, the total number of macropropositions selected is 133, while it could be higher if no previous selection had been done.

4. Results

As a result of the analysis carried out, macropropositions can be classified into seven main topics (umbrella topics), also called *thematic cores*. According to this classification, the most outstanding macroproposition is Theresa May's leadership.

Table 1: Main topics frequency.

Main topics	Relative frequency	Absolute frequency
Theresa May's leadership	51.8%	69
Theresa May's resignation	13.5%	18
Brexit talks	12.7%	17
Brexit impact	12.0%	16
General considerations about current policy	9.7%	13

Source: Own elaboration.

The predominance of the question of May's leadership (51.8%) does not seem surprising because, as indicated above, this study focuses on female leadership, with the former Premiere as a main actor, and all the texts selected have this in common.

The other topics appear in a balanced way, and May's leadership is the centre of attention for the authors of the articles. Under the umbrella of leadership, macropropositions were examined for possible subtopics, to better understand the core interest in media discourse around the figure of May. These subtopics are classified as follows:

Table 2: Theresa May's leadership subtopic frequency.

Subtopics	Relative frequency	Absolute frequency
Physical and character features	7.2%	5
Positive assessment of her professional performance	7.2%	5
Negative assessment of her professional performance	85.5%	59

Source: Own elaboration.

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As expected, May's professional performance over these years has received mostly negative ratings (85.5%). The 'inability' to obtain consensus in the British Parliament to ratify the Brexit agreement, the main mission of the governor during her tenure, explains this assessment.

Within this negative professional assessment that the article writers have made of May's work, two more subdivisions were examined: the macropropositions have been divided into those that refer to Theresa May's relationship with the European Union, on the one hand, and those that refer to the relationship between her and her counterparts in the United Kingdom, on the other:

Table 3: Macropropositions frequency May-EU-UK.

Relationship	Relative frequency	Absolute frequency
May - EU	22.03%	13
May - UK	77.9%	46

Source: Own elaboration.

As it can be seen in the figure above, within the representation of Theresa May's leadership, journalists privileged the relationship the leader maintained with her colleagues in the United Kingdom Parliament (77.9%). This proportion can be explained because the period studied coincides with when May was trying to get the British Parliament to approve her EU exit agreement, after the result of the January 15th Parliamentary vote, when her proposal was rejected by 230 votes (202 in favour by 432 against).

Moreover, within the thematic core of the negative assessment of May's professional performance, two main trends can be found. First, there is a proportion of appearances in which the former Prime Minister is presented as *guilty* (or *Malefactor*, according to van Leeuwen) of not fulfilling her duties as PM. On the other hand, she is at times represented as a victim of her political colleagues.

Most of the time, Theresa May is represented as mainly responsible for her forced resignation (59.3%) compared to her representation as a victim of political circumstances (40.6%).

When May is blamed for the failure of the Brexit talks, attributes such as insistence, naivety and, above all, inability are linked to her. According to the texts analysed, her lack of ability is not related, at a basic level, to a lack of professional commitment. However, it seems directly linked to two different questions: on the one hand, a problem of ignorance of her political duties; and on the other, a problem in her character meaning she lacks the audacity or fearlessness necessary to manage Government and the Brexit talks. Regarding the first, there is a tendency to represent May as a 'bad player:'

(1) She played her hand badly, moved her pawns badly and although she was faithful to her principles, it became clear that she would not be the Prime Minister to take her country out of the Union by brute force; she wasted the opportunity (Suanzes, P. "Los seis meses perdidos por la cerrazón de Irlanda y la falta de arrojo de Theresa May". *El Mundo,* 18-10-2019).

(2) Despite having a majority in the British Parliament, given the criticisms that were beginning to emerge, Theresa May decided to bring forward the elections to June 2017 to strengthen her position. But the gambit failed (Rey, J. "Cinco actos de soberbia que han acabado con la dimisión de May". *El Español*, 25-5-2019).

While in (1), it is implied that the cards or options available to May were not good enough, in (2), May options were not even assessed, but the result is compared with the loss of the game. Sometimes, the game becomes more serious, such as when warlike metaphors are used:

(3) May called early elections, with the vain illusion of crushing her rival and achieving a 'mandate for Brexit.' The move backfired and she lost the overall majority (Fresneda, C. "De Cameron a May, lo que la tempestad del Brexit se llevó". *El Mundo,* 17-10-2019).

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In (3), it can be seen that the game is represented as a cruel act in which the candidate can crush the opponent. In all the previous cases, it is observed that in the metaphor of politics as a game, the role represented by May is that of a player, at least, mediocre.

May is represented as a politician capable of knowing the laws that make it possible to participate in the political game, but not the subterfuges that allow her to claim victory in it. It can also be seen in the following fragment:

> (4) Her first mistake was not to realize that the political game in the United Kingdom rejects consensus, and that the exercise of power involves making decisions alone and sustaining them (De Miguel, R. "Theresa May y el Brexit: la primera ministra que se aisló del mundo". *El País,* 24-5-2019).

As is clear from (4), not being aware of the functioning of the political game in the country of which she is Prime Minister reveals an inability to govern due to ignorance of this type of policy. Along with this inability, caused by ignorance, in the role of guilt attributed to May, there are a series of values in which May is attributed a lack of courage:

> (5) If six months ago May had the political skills, the impetus required and had bet on a different solution than the one she maintained until the last day, the political map of the continent would be very different today (Suanzes, P. "Los seis meses perdidos por la cerrazón de Irlanda y la falta de arrojo de Theresa May". *El Mundo*, 18-10-2019).

> (6) It's over. Theresa May has thrown in the towel after seeing her plan for 'Brexit' fail again and again (Rei, J. "Cinco actos de soberbia que han acabado con la dimisón de May". *El Español*, 25-5-2019).

The conditional structure together with the past perfect subjunctive 'would have had' in fragment (5) implies that May lacked, in the past, the qualities mentioned: momentum and courage. It can be inferred that if she had shown more audacity, the Brexit process would have been more successful.

Of all the linguistic-discursive structures available to report a resignation, the expression *throw in the towel* in (6) clearly refers to surrender. This expression, which is repeated in several articles, again translates the representation of the role played by May in Brexit into the recreational and military fields, as in (1), (2), (3) and (4).

From fragments such as (5) and (6) it is implied that May's role is characterized as guilty of taking bad decisions on behalf of the British Government. In the same way, those wrong decisions came about due to a problem of character of the former Prime Minister, in particular to a lack of courage, in addition to ignorance of political tricks, according to the Spanish digital press's representation of reality.

When presenting Theresa May as a victim (40.6%), three things are constantly mentioned: the inheritance received from her predecessor David Cameron (7), her relationship with the Conservatives (8) and Brexit's own contradictions (9).

> (7) Criticism abounds about the alleged lack of leadership or vision of May, whose mandate can apparently only be appreciated by comparing it with the catastrophic imprudence of her predecessor (Gómez, V. "Elogio de Theresa May con vistas a La Moncloa". *El Español*, 24-7-2019).

> (8) Theresa May has suffered a whopping fifty-three resignations in less than three years (Basurto, A. "El Reino Unido ya ha cambiado." *El Mundo*, 13-8-2019)

> (9) But May found that Brexit had become a catalyst for colleagues to finally close ranks around the figure of the EU negotiator, the Frenchman Michel Barnier (Pellicer, Ll. "Los pasos en falso de Theresa May en Bruselas". *El País*, 24-5-2019).

As can be seen in (7), it is the government of May's predecessor in office, David Cameron, which is credited with the catastrophic imprudence of calling the United Kingdom's referendum on leaving the EU. This is also the case in this fragment:

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(10) The prime minister is an incurable zombie in her own party, but if part of her misfortune is deserved, another important part is inherited. The seed of the division was planted by her predecessor in office, David Cameron, when he allowed the political extravagance of half of his ministers campaigning for Brexit and the other half against, in the 2016 referendum (De Miguel, R. "¿Cuándo dijo May que dimitía?" *El País*, 11-4-2019).

As can be deduced from (10), Theresa May could have been a victim of the problem of a Conservative party divided since the EU exit referendum campaign, which took place in 2016. Internal division would be the cause of many of the resignations referred to in example (8), which were a direct consequence of the existing discomfort in the party. That discomfort then found in May a perfect target:

(11) Bad news for the hard wing of the Conservatives, who put all the blame on May (De Miguel, R. "¿Cuándo dijo May que dimitía?". *El País*, 11-4-2019).

(12) The Prime Minister, Theresa May, became the scapegoat for all the demons that Brexit had unleashed (De Miguel, R. "¿Cuándo dijo May que dimitía?" *El País*, 11-4-2019).

In the representation of Theresa May as a victim of the Brexit negotiation process, the Spanish press blamed the Prime Minister's party colleagues, who placed all the blame on her, as can be seen in (11). The indefinite determiner *all* implies that they blamed May for more mistakes than the leader deserved. In (12) the journalist describes the role as victim of Theresa May as the *scapegoat*, which also refers to her as the object of blame from other party members. May's role, then, is still one of victim, bearing the blame for actions not decided by her.

Regarding the role of guilty or victimhood granted to Theresa May, a divergence in the frequencies can be seen, depending on whether the macropropositions describe May's relationship with British politicians or with her European counterparts. This can be seen in the following table.

Table 4: Roles assigned to May.Guilty-Victim: EU -UK differences.

	Relationship with European colleagues	Relationship with British counterparts
Role	Relative frequency	Relative frequency
Guilty	84.6%	52.1%
Victim	15.3%	47.8%

Source: Own elaboration.

As can be seen in figures above, the relative frequency of the guilt/victimhood roles differs quite a lot depending on whether the relationship is with her British colleagues, (Conservative party members or rivals in Parliament) or with EU representatives. May's representation in the subject of Brexit talks with Europe is, very clearly, that of culprit. This can be seen from the previous examples, (1) and (5), and verified in the following fragment:

(13) And May managed to get this trip seen only as a trip to Brussels. The long history of disagreements within the EU could suggest that visits to the capitals might create cracks among the twenty-seven (Pellicer, Ll. "Los pasos en falso de Theresa May en Bruselas". *El País*, 24-5-2019).

In (13), the responsibility for Brussels's negative perception of May is attributed only to her, due to the use of the verb *to manage*, which has the meaning of achieving what is intended. Together with the adverb *only*, it implies that May tried to make that trip (to Germany, with the mission of meeting with Merkel), to achieve a goal very different than the one she really attained.

However, when looking at the discourse produced by the Spanish press about May's relationship with her British counterparts, it is observed that the difference in the frequency of representation of the guilt/victimhood roles is noticeably lessened. When explaining May's

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relationship with the British Parliament, and especially with the members of her own party, the role of victim granted to the Prime Minister is emphasized. Thus, in (14), (15) and (16):

(14) The Prime Minister resists the internal rebellion and produces another withdrawal plan that avoids a resignation that seems inevitable (Redacción. "Los tres años de May como Primera Ministra en diez imágenes". *El Español*, 24-5-2019).

(15) May returned to London empty-handed and among tough headlines that spoke unambiguously of "humiliation" (Pellicer, Ll. "*Los pasos en falso de Theresa May en Bruselas*". *El País*, 24-5-2019).

(16) [Theresa May] She signed an agreement with Brussels, in the winter of discontent of 2018, but could not overcome the via crucis of Parliament (Fresneda, C. "De Cameron a May. Lo que la tempestad del Brexit se llevó". *El Mundo*, 10-17-2019).

The verb *to resist* in (14), the adjective *hard* in (15) and the expression *via crucis* in (16) suggest the victimization of May while granting the role of evildoer-culprit to the social actors of Britain: Tory politicians that rebel in (14), the British press that uses tough headlines in (15) and the British Parliament as a whole, in (16), which turns May's political experience into pain comparable to a *via crucis*.

Related to this last example are expressions from the semantic field of religion for the suffering of May. It is clearly expressed in (16) with the *via crucis* or way of the cross, as well as in the following examples:

(17) Talks were an ordeal (calvario) for May, but also for the twenty-seven, which set autumn of 2018 as the deadline to reach an agreement that would be later ratified by the British Parliament. (Pellicer, Ll. "Los pasos en falso de Theresa May en Bruselas". *El País,* 24-5-2019).

(18) Theresa May had remembered the moment in which she embraced, with redeeming ingenuity, the promise of Brexit (De Miguel, R. "Theresa May y el Brexit: la Primera Ministra que se aisló del país". *El País,* 24-5-2019).

Both, *via crucis* and Calvary (17) or redemption (18) indicate that journalists have turned to the religious lexicon in search of a hyperbolic characterization of the suffering of May. There is a clear contrast between her representation as a victim and that of her antagonists or executioners, a role embodied by the members of the British Parliament.

This representation of Theresa May, characterized as a victim with respect to her British colleagues, serves to demonize and attribute the negative assessments to the rest of the politicians in the country who defended Brexit. As previously mentioned, the representation as a victim is not present in the media discourse of the Spanish press when the subject is the European representatives in Brussels. On this issue, the Prime Minister appears mostly represented as an evildoer-culprit, while EU representatives and citizens embody the role of victims in the Brexit talks.

5. Concluding remarks

This article examines the discourse of the Spanish digital press around the figure of Theresa May as leader of the British Parliament and, more specifically, since her plan for Brexit or the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union was rejected by the British Parliament.

Starting from the premise of Critical Discourse Studies, that a semantic analysis of the macrostructure and microstructure of the texts provides a series of preferred roles and attributes to represent social actors, the main goal of the analysis was to understand the type of representation of the figure of May when her leadership went into decline and began to be questioned by the media and by citizens.

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After collecting the main semantic content of the texts and grouping them into themes, it has been shown that negative assessments of May's leadership over the period studied are a dominant theme in the articles discussing the British leader in the Spanish press. Following van Leeuwen's classification of social actors, it is seen that May appears as culprit or victim of failure in the Brexit talks.

After analysing the discourse of the Spanish press around the relationship of the former Tory leader with representatives of the European Union, it is very common to attribute to May the role of malefactor or culprit of the political situation. In this type of representation, May is said to be unable to lead the negotiation process mainly for two reasons: the first, due to the alleged lack of boldness or courage that is deemed necessary to bring Brexit to fruition; the second, lack of experience, because they give May attributes such as ignorance of the functioning of the British and European political game.

The role of culprit is not so clear when observing May's relationship with members of the British Parliament. In this second category, the representation attributes to May the role of victim or culprit with similar frequencies. In this portrait as victim, there is a tendency to exaggeration, resulting in the forced representation of May's antagonists (her counterparts, British politicians) as executioners, and in consequence, giving a negative representation of them while showing empathy and understanding towards May's situation. This benevolent attitude of the press towards May's performance is absent when looking at her functions as a Brexit negotiator with the European Union.

The anti-Brexit position in which the Spanish media were located is reflected in the two types of representation thrown out of Theresa May: guilty of incompetence when represented in a European context, but victim of its British counterparts. This second representation allows newspapers to profile a much more negative image of the politicians who promoted Brexit. It can be said, therefore, that Theresa May's (and the failure of her leadership) kind of representation served the Spanish media to strengthen a negative representation of politicians in favour of Brexit.

Regarding whether the image offered by the Spanish media about Theresa May encourages the normalization of female leadership or contributes to questioning it, the attributes that are most commonly used to explain the decline of her leadership are rather close to the latter. The lack of courage or bravery attributed to the British politician connects with the tradition of representing women as individuals not suited for positions of great responsibility due to a supposed lack of the necessary aggressiveness.

May is also characterized as a player who does not know the tricks of politicians despite being perfectly familiar with the rules of politics. This represents a paradox, since the Spanish media explanation of Theresa May's ineptitude for leadership seems to be her ignorance of the private sphere as opposed to her extensive experience at the public one. This reverses the role traditionally assigned to women although it does not serve to consolidate a successful image of female leadership.

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