



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

JCads

JOURNAL OF CORPORA AND DISCOURSE STUDIES 2018, 1(1):1-5
E-ISSN 2515-0251

MELANI SCHRÖTER

UNIVERSITY OF READING

BOOK REVIEW: JEFFRIES, L., & WALKER, B. (2017). *KEYWORDS IN THE PRESS: THE NEW LABOUR YEARS*. LONDON: BLOOMSBURY

CITATION

Schröter, M. (2018). Book review: Jeffries,
L., & Walker, B. (2017). *Keywords in the
press: the New Labour years*. London:
Bloomsbury. *Journal of Corpora and
Discourse Studies*, 1(1):1-5

CONTACT

Melani Schröter, Department of Modern Languages and European Studies, School of
Literature and Languages, University of Reading, Whiteknights, PO Box 217, Reading
RG6 6AH, United Kingdom. m.schroeter@reading.ac.uk

DOI

10.18573/jcads.20

ORCID

—

ISSUE DOI

10.18573/jcads.v1i1

LICENSE

© The author. Available under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license

Review accepted 2018-09-28

Book review: Jeffries, L., & Walker, B. (2017). *Keywords in the press*. London: Bloomsbury

Melani Schröter
University of Reading

In this book, the authors convincingly combine two elements: firstly, the concept of cultural keywords as developed by Raymond Williams, i.e., the notion that some words are particularly indicative of the historical, cultural or socio-political context from which they arise. Secondly, unlike Williams (1983), or Bennett et al. (2005) or indeed Wierzbicka (1997, 2006, 2010; whose work is not mentioned by the authors), they usefully approach keywords with corpus linguistics methodology, and with the understanding that the meaning of a word arises from its usage in context. They apply this approach to a purpose-built corpus of newspaper reporting from the years of Tony Blair's premiership. Both in order to tease out keywords in the corpus linguistics sense, i.e., by statistical comparison, as well as to show whether or how their use changed during the Blair years, they use a newspaper corpus from the preceding Major premiership as reference corpus.

Both corpora are compiled of newspaper articles from three broadsheet papers, using search words indicating a discourse about the respective governments (pp. 24ff.), limited to the size of 15 million words each and part-of-speech tagged with the CLAWS tagger (UCREL, 2015) developed at Lancaster University. On pp. 28ff. they give a detailed account of how, through a combination of quantitative, formal and contextual criteria, they narrowed down an initial list of 3,064 statistical keywords to a final list of six: choice, global, reform, respect, spin, terror. From pp. 41ff., a chapter is dedicated to each keyword in which, as the authors set out on pp. 34ff., the keyword is analysed by taking into account collocation, semantic prosody and semantic preference, concordances and syntactic context, using the notion of Textual-Conceptual Functions from a Critical Stylistics framework. This way, the authors show how not only the frequency of these words increases during the Blair years, but also how they "take on additional political baggage during the period" (p. 34).

For each of the six words under investigation, the authors demonstrate through careful and detailed analyses how the political meaning of these keywords evolves. For example, in the case of *choice* the authors show that the politically relevant sense is based on choice as a non-countable mass noun; the condition of having a set of options to choose from (p. 71). Collocating verbs as well as coordinated collocates of choice indicate

a positive semantic prosody so that *choice* is presented during the Blair years as something desirable that should not be inhibited. Pre- and postmodification of *choice* indicates that *choice* is about public services, in particular education and healthcare. The authors also point out that the bald, unmodified use of *choice* arises during the Blair years and most clearly indicates “the end point of the process (...) of a specialized sense of a lexical item developing that becomes a kind of shorthand for a complex set of ideas, often based on a particular ideological stance” (p. 78).

To me the most interesting finding of the book is one which helps further the conceptualisation of cultural or political keywords, namely that all of the words investigated by the authors show such a pattern of bald, unmodified use. Even though these were in no case the majority of uses, they arguably build on the establishing socio-political meanings of the words, i.e., they “take on a meaning which is left undefined in the context and is therefore assumed to be agreed upon by the producer and the recipient of the text” (p. 109), “becoming more like a shorthand label for a complex idea, but one which is both assumed and slippery” (p. 186). It is only through the careful contextual investigation which focuses not only on the semantic categories and prosodies of the collocates, but also on the structural embeddedness of the keywords in their context, that this type of usage emerges as a common feature of all six keywords. The methodology for analysis is sound, systematic, explicit, carefully reflected and transparent so that the book will be very useful as a guideline for similar studies.

The focus on context that both Williams’ concept of cultural keywords as well as a corpus linguistics approach to lexical semantics bring with them, as well as the authors’ choice of text corpora from public discourse, makes this study a contribution not only to corpus linguistics, but also to discourse analysis. At the outset, the authors make clear that they are interested in “the spectacle of democratic leaders changing language to suit their own ends, not least by taking over everyday words and developing new semantic (denotational or connotational) or pragmatic meanings for them” (p. 2). This focus on strategic use of language and politically motivated initiation of language change as well as their use of Critical Stylistics (pp. 8ff.) for describing some of their contextual evidence also makes it an important contribution to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). With this approach, the authors a) provide empirical evidence for processes of lexical change and in particular socio-politically driven lexical change; b) promote a critical approach to discourse that puts emphasis on lexis and lexical semantics and c) inform corpus-assisted approaches to the study of discourse. The authors provide useful avenues for further exploration and methodological refinement (pp. 67, 97ff., 190).

Having attempted to marry the concept of cultural/political keywords with a corpus-assisted methodology myself (Schröter & Veniard, 2016; Schröter *et al.*, 2018), I did not need any persuading that keywords are a valuable approach to studying discourse. However, one criticism that I have encountered before also occurred to me when I read

Jeffries and Walker's book, which is, as one query at a conference put it, whether we are arguing out of or into the discourse. On the one hand, we build corpora for empirical evidence or even, as Jeffries and Walker undertake it, determine keyness by statistical comparison in a more data-driven approach. On the other hand, we tend to use our more or less explicit contextual knowledge to inform some steps in the procedure (in this case cf. p. 33 the presumption that *work* and *welfare* would be less contested or prone to semantic change, p. 76 to focus on the link between choice and public services), and obviously for interpreting findings as well (p. 107, characteristics of New Labour language).

It is not always clear whether the authors aim to show what was going on in language during the Blair years, or whether they aim to show what was going on in politics during the Blair years and how this plays out in the use of language. What speaks for the former are the empirically grounded insights they provide into the processes of the establishment of a lexical item as keyword which may also apply to other forms of lexical change, e.g. borrowing and neologisms. What speaks for the latter is the choice of a period of political change linked to a party/premiership and the fact that most of the keywords investigated reflect that government's agenda. However, in this case more contextualisation and drawing on other sources about the discourse of New Labour (e.g., Finlayson, 2003; Bastow & Martin, 2003) might have been useful, as in the chapter about *global* (cf. pp. 116ff.). It also remains rather unclear at times whether the book illuminates the discourse of the Blair government or the discourse about the Blair government. This ambiguity arises from the choice of newspaper corpora, which may reflect and reproduce the discourse of the Blair government but also reflect criticism and distancing from it (cf. the occurrence of *spin* as a keyword pp. 41-66 and p. 182). This is difficult to resolve, which the authors acknowledge at times (p. 7, p. 163). In order to investigate the discourse of, rather than about, the Blair government/New Labour project, it might have been more useful to study political speeches by the New Labour government and the preceding Major premiership.

Despite these slight ambiguities, which seem difficult to avoid, I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the notion of socio-politically relevant lexis and/or semantic change that is motivated through changing socio-political contexts. It is useful for anyone in CDA who is interested in such a more lexicosemantic approach and for anyone in corpus linguistics interested in socio-political contexts. Such crossover, as it were, is also proposed by the developing field of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (cf. Partington *et al.*, 2013). The study of socio-political keywords is also likely to reach out to broader audiences, including other disciplines such as social and political sciences, since it is also often at the lexical level that non-specialists in linguistics become interested in language use. The methodology that Jeffries and Walker propose is very useful to tease out the semantic development of words into cultural/political keywords. It thereby

further illuminates the concept, and it can also be used as a methodological template for future analyses of such keywords. I hope that this book will inspire more interest in such socio-politically relevant lexis.

References

- Bastow, S., & Martin, J. (2003). *Third Way Discourse. European Ideologies in the Twentieth Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bennett, T., Grossberg, L., & Morris, M. (2005). *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Finlayson, A. (2003). *Making Sense of New Labour*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Partington, A., Duguid, A., & Taylor, C. (2013). *Patterns and Meanings in Discourse: Theory and Practice in Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Schröter, M., & Veniard, M. (2016). Contrastive analysis of keywords in discourses: Intégration and Integration in French and German discourses about migration. *International Journal of Language and Culture* 3(1), 1–33: doi:10.1075/ijolc.3.1.01sch
- Schröter, M., Veniard, M., Taylor, C., & Blätte, A. (2018). A comparative analysis of the keyword multicultural(ism) in French, British, German and Italian migration discourse. In: A. Musolff & L. Viola (Eds.), *Migration and Media: Crisis Communication about Immigration in Europe and the World*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- UCREL (University Centre for Computer Corpus Research on Language). (2015). CLAWS part-of-speech tagger for English (Version 4) [Computer software]. Lancaster: Lancaster University. Retrieved from <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/claws/>
- Wierzbicka, A. (1997). *Understanding Cultures through their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2006). *English: Meaning and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2010). *Experience, Evidence, and Sense: The Hidden Cultural Legacy of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana.