



Voices from the Fringes. A Discourse Analysis of Nicola Sturgeon's Speech on Scotland's Place in the World

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Abstract: This chapter aims to present a discourse analysis of the First Minister's speech. Language is not merely supposed to be a means of communicating information, but also a tool for compelling conclusions, establishing or denying claims: "Discourse analysis sees texts as sites in which social meanings are formed and reproduced, social identities are shaped and social facts are established"¹, while discourse alone "is a systematic ordering of language which involves rules, terminology and conventions. They shape specific ways of speaking and understanding. It is a group of statements which provide a language as a way for representing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. [...] Critical discourse analysis is concerned with the social and political context of discourse, based on the view that language is not only conditioned by these contexts, but itself helps constitute them."² British identity can very well be defined by analysing the way Scotland promotes its international image. In her speech, Nicola Sturgeon addresses topics like immigration, climate change, Brexit and Scottish independence, offering a full and complex picture of her nation's state of affairs, as to give Scots a voice through her own.

Keywords: discourse analysis; national identity; Scotland; Nicola Sturgeon; Brexit; Scottish independence; climate change.

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¹ Fran Tonkiss, "Discourse Analysis", in Clive Seale (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture*, London, Sage, 2012, op. cit., pp. 412-416.

² *Idem*.

1. Introduction

On the occasion of Tartan Day, an American celebration of Scottish inheritance that takes place every year on the 6th of April, the same date when the Declaration of Arbroath was signed in 1320, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon gave a representative speech at California's Stanford University: "I'm here in the USA this week as part of what we call Scotland Week. It was President Bush back in 2008 who proclaimed 6 April every year as Tartan Day – the key event in Scotland Week, so Thursday of this week is Tartan Day."³ As previously argued in the theoretical approach of the present work, a good way to define one is to observe the contrasts with the others. British identity can very well be defined by analysing the way Scotland promotes its international image.

The next subchapters present a discourse analysis inspired from Fran Tonkiss' (2012) four elements model:

1. identifying the key themes and arguments;
2. presenting association and variation patterns;
3. characterisation and agency, representing individuals or groups who are active or passive;
4. emphasis and silences in a text.

2. Key themes and arguments

As enumerated in the very presentation of the speech on the Scottish Government website, Nicola Sturgeon approaches the following main topics: climate change, immigration, Brexit and Scottish independence. Considering the setting and the pretext of this official visit, namely Tartan Day, an American celebration of Scottish ancestry, other themes may be added to the list: international relations, and of course, identity. These represent the key themes of the First Minister's discourse, as derived from language elements such as keywords, images and phrases.

As the representative of a nation, much of Sturgeon's speech portrays Scotland. This reflects through an abundant use of the personal pronoun "we", which stands for "we as a nation", and other pronouns such as "our" or even "I", which stands for a Scottish official speaking in Scottish people's behalf. Scotland is presented as a country striving for continuous development and fine standards: "innovation is part of our history, and also part of our modern identity. [...] That means that we seek to build a fair, prosperous and sustainable society at home in Scotland, and also around the world". Identity is constructed through the approach of

³ Scotland's place in the world: First Minister's Stanford University speech, 4 Apr 2017, available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-place-in-the-world-first-ministers-stanford-university-speech/>, accessed on June 15, 2021.

a range of issues that are of current interest for Scotland, its position in relation with these issues depicting an image of the nation itself.

The first key topic through which we receive an image of Scotland's political endeavours is building strong international relationships. This is made clear from the very beginning of the discourse, by making all sorts of associations between Scotland and its host country, California. Sturgeon breaks the ice with a friendly approach to McFaul, Director and Senior Fellow at Freeman Sprogli Centre, stressing on the willingness to see him as sort of a distant fellow-Scot, with a certain disregard for the veracity of the facts: "One of the many interesting things I found out about Michael this morning is that he was born in Glasgow. But Glasgow, Montana, rather than Glasgow, Scotland. But nevertheless I'm going to claim that as a Scottish connection". An important part of the beginning of the speech focuses on making such connections, disclosing the strong desire of Scotland to broaden its horizons in terms of political and social cooperation. The purpose of the visit itself is given by the celebration of Tartan Day – the key event in Scotland Week celebrated back in Scotland: "Scotland Week and Tartan Day are really intended to celebrate firstly the contribution of Scottish people to the US down the generations but also the very many links and relationships between Scotland and the US. And, most importantly, to look at how we strengthen those links in the future".

There are many similar phrases that reinforce the desire to "make friends". The fact that more and more Americans claim Scottish ancestry comes as a source of pride and opportunity: "It's a great compliment but it's also an opportunity, and let me tell you it is an opportunity we are determined to take full advantage of". There is a repetition of key words like "connection" and "ties" that puts an emphasis on the image of Scotland as complementary to California: "Many of the ties between Scotland and the US are evident here in Palo Alto. /So the ties between our two countries are longstanding. /The connections between Scotland and California – ties based on culture and history, trade and commerce, family and friendship – continue to flourish. / Those international ties are part of what I want to talk about today".

One of the most important topics discussed by Nicola Sturgeon during her visit was immigration. The First Minister makes open welcoming statements to the students of Stanford University, extending the invitation to everybody interested to join Scotland in the future, declaring the nation more than willing to embrace immigrants as people of their own. Through words like "nobody – (least of all me, is going to stop you [...] if you want to be Scottish", she gives reassurance, sounding utterly confident, offering the idea of unanimity and placing her and all the other Scots on the same page. She argues that "Scotland's modern identity, much like that of the US, is an inclusive one", for it knows its best interest, and being exclusive, since it historically has a lower level of population growth than many other parts of

Europe, would only affect it negatively: “for the sake of our economic prosperity we need to see more people choosing to come and live and work in Scotland”.

Of course, these being said, it is clear that Scotland had a different perspective on Brexit than its peer British nations. Hence, another key theme is to be analysed. Sturgeon is very vocal on this topic, explaining Scotland’s historical membership to the European Union, as to argue the frustration derived from “being forced to leave the EU against our will: That membership has brought us significant economic, environmental and social benefits”. The First Minister defines Scotland’s identity in relation to the supranational organization: “EU membership has become a very important part of Scotland's identity. It speaks to our sense of who we are”. The general post-Brexit state is referred to using terms like *barriers*, *deep uncertainty and anxiety*, having effects from ‘*bad, to awful, to catastrophic*’.

This naturally leads to the next key theme, national independence. Long having been considered by Scotland, today more than ever the path to it seems to be lying ahead. In the light of current events that made the Scots feel as if they have been dragged into a whirlpool, the wish to release themselves from the conditions of the United Kingdom is growing stronger. Measures have been taken in this regard: “the Scottish Parliament [...] agreed to seek consent from the UK Government for a further referendum on independence, once the final terms of Brexit deal are known. [...] Scotland will have the opportunity to choose our own future, to choose the direction that we want to take”. As far as Sturgeon sees it, the choice to be made is whether to remain equal to the other British states, or to become equal to *other countries across our British Isles, Europe and the wider world*. She is an advocate of independence, as she clearly and undoubtedly states: “My own view, as a supporter of independence, is that we will choose the second course”.

Climate change is also discussed as a means to promote a positive message with respect to Scotland’s priorities as a respectful country, as are other aspects like gender equality and inclusion, all being treated as extensions in the context of identity. Scotland is proud to be “the first country to establish a climate justice fund for developing countries”. Sturgeon identifies a common problem that is caused by global warming: “as we look into the future, we know that the displacement of populations [...] – is likely to dwarf the scale of migration that Europe has seen as a result of the Syria crisis”. Scotland raises awareness on the importance of *renewable energy sources* or *offshore wind farms*, proudly counting them as measures it personally managed to take so far.

3. Association and variation

Since it is the First Minister talking, the central topic of discussion is Scotland. The nation is the main actor, presented in association with a variety of groups and problems. The first association to be made is that between Scotland and California. They are brought on equal ranks culturally speaking, in the context of Tartan Day. Therefore, Scotland and California are associated with one another and with culture: *Tartan Day – the key event in Scotland Week*. Throughout the discourse the same association persists, invoking words like *connection* and *ties*.

But as we move forward, we observe Scotland being put in relation with other problems. Scotland is associated with Brexit, given its membership to the United Kingdom. Although in the light of recent events this nation is associated with *barriers for trade with Europe, deep uncertainty and anxiety*, Sturgeon insists on clarifying things giving views from the inside as to how Scotland really feels about this and what it stands for in its heart. Therefore, we observe Scotland being associated with the European Union rather than with deciding to leave it: “Scotland has been a member of the EEC, which is now of course the European Union, for more than 40 years. [...] EU membership has become a very important part of Scotland's identity. It speaks to our sense of who we are”. In addition to this, the European Union is associated with healthy principles: “the fundamental principle underpinning the EU – that independent nations work together on equal terms for a common good [...] appeals to me and to many people across Scotland”. When talking about Europe, the First Minister also refers to northern European states as to exemplify good practices and model societies. Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Switzerland are exemplified as prosperous, being associated with a superior rank that the UK looks up to: “Two weeks ago, in fact, research was published on the happiest countries in the world. [...] All of those countries score highly on measures of income equality – they do considerably better than the UK, for example”. Hence the North of Europe stands for economic development.

A rather obvious association which is clear from the start is that of the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon – “I” – with the Scottish nation – “we” – these two being interconnected. What seem to be two actors can be interpreted as one most of the time. But there are moments when Sturgeon identifies herself as an individual belonging to specific groups. This is the case when she talks for example about independence. Because it has always been a complex issue that needs to be submitted to vote, she acknowledges the one too many views with respect to it, therefore she declares herself as part of a group within the nation: “My own view, as a supporter of independence”. She does the same when treating aspects of immigration. She vouches for her fellow citizens, assuring the world that they are pro-immigration, but makes a point out of associating her personal image with that

of a tolerant person who identifies herself as a welcoming Scot: “As far as I'm concerned, if you want to be Scottish, nobody, least of all me, is going to stop you”. In this context, the United Kingdom is associated with strict boundaries and a risky future: *leaving the United Kingdom was a risk. [...] So it's somewhat ironic that the opposite has turned out to be true.*

Further on, Scotland is associated with qualitative higher education, once again mirroring California: “For Scotland, as for California, our universities are incredible cultural, social and economic assets”. The Scottish people take pride in their position in the 'Times Higher Education Supplement' which ranked them on top of the list: “it showed Scotland had more world class universities in the rankings, per head of population, than any other country in the world, with the sole exception Luxembourg”. There is once again an association of the European Union with the positive aspects in Scotland, holding it responsible for much of its success as a nation: “there is no doubt that in recent years, membership of the European Union has been fundamental to Scotland's academic success. One sixth of our academic staff are EU citizens from outside the UK. So are one sixth of our postgraduate students”.

Another important element on which discourse is constructed is variation. This includes contrasts, trying to reconcile conflicting ideas, coping with contradiction and uncertainty or counter alternatives (Tonkiss, 2012). Some of the main contrasts in this speech are those showing Scotland in opposition with the United Kingdom. From the very beginning of the Brexit discussion, Sturgeon puts the two in contradiction due to the fact that the Scots had to submit to the British majority and leave the European Union: “When the UK held the referendum on EU membership last year, a large majority of people in Scotland who voted – 62% in fact – chose to stay part of the EU.

However we were outvoted by the rest of the UK”. It is clear from here that they identify more as Scottish nationalists than British citizens, since they do now seem to assume responsibility for the consequences their membership to the United Kingdom led them to. Scotland seems to dissociate from Britishness, valuing more its territorial majority than its British identity. The UK Government is perceived as the threshold between Scotland and the freedom of making its own choices: “the UK Government last week notified the European Commission of its intention to leave the EU. [...] And Scotland [...] faces being forced to leave the EU against our will”. Unlike England or Britain in general, *Scotland's modern identity [...] is an inclusive one.* It supports immigration, hence its yet again visible contrast to the UK, which has sent a global message that its identity is rather exclusive: “The reason for running these risks – for leaving the single market as well as the European Union –

is that the UK Government has prioritised control of immigration over everything else”.

In this regard, there is an emphasis that places Scotland in contrast to the whole world: “there is no major political party in Scotland today that would argue for constraints on immigration in the way we hear in other parts of the world, because we know that would be damaging to our interests”. One perfectly plausible explanation rendered by the Scottish First Minister with respect to this matter is that “our level of population growth has been lower than other parts of the UK, lower than many other parts of Europe. So for the sake of our economic prosperity we need to see more people choosing to come and live and work in Scotland”. Thus we observe yet another contrast between Scotland and the UK, and even between Scotland and Europe.

The same oppositions, at a small scale, can also be found within Scotland, which includes different groups. There is opposition between those who voted to stay in the EU and those who voted to leave (*I am well aware that even in Scotland, that voted by such a big margin to remain in the EU, more than a third of voters chose to leave*) or between those who support independence, as does Nicola Sturgeon (*My own view, as a supporter of independence*), and those who do not.

Variation is also seen in the way so many topics are approached in the discourse. Nicola Sturgeon addresses problems that range from international cooperation, political issues such as Brexit and national independence, to education, gender equality, immigration and climate change. She does not stick to only one topic, but juggles with a variety of issues. Among them is trying to reconcile conflicting ideas that have long been among Scottish preoccupations, such as the position to take with respect to their independence. Is it the case to leave the UK? And if so, is it the case to reclaim its European membership or not? “Nobody really argued or debated about whether Scotland should be part of the EU – the only debate then was about whether we would be if we were independent. So [...] the way in which the UK Government is choosing to impose Brexit upon Scotland – presents Scotland with something of a dilemma. [...] a further referendum on independence [...] will mean that [...] the people of Scotland will have the opportunity to choose our own future, to choose the direction that we want to take. And in doing so we will be considering issues that go far beyond the issue of membership in or out of the EU”.

4. Characterisation and agency

Nicola Sturgeon’s discourse provides many agents that are depicted in the text as active or passive in producing problems or solutions (Tonkiss, 2012). The dominant subject of the discourse is of course Scotland. Through Nicola Sturgeon’s

voice, the nation speaks. There are presented various topics of interest, the subject being always active as the one which is responsible for identifying its problems and coming up with solutions. Nicola Sturgeon, although representing the Scots throughout the speech, sometimes identifies as her own self, making statements of her own and sharing opinions of her own. She is again an active agent. Then come a few other agents into discussion, Scotland describing its position in the world in relation to them. Some of the first are California and the United States, which are the welcoming hosts in this context. Not less important are Europe and the European Union, which are presented as part of Scotland's identity. Last, but not least, is the United Kingdom, which could not have been left out.

As previously mentioned, the first agent to be described is Scotland. This nation is characterised as an open one, a cosmopolitan one, and one that has the confidence to compare itself to the largest US state, California. If only culturally, Scotland takes pride in considering itself complementary to California. Constructions like *Scotland's modern identity, much like that of the US*, or *Many of the ties between Scotland and the US are evident, "or Scotland, as for California, depict similarities between the two nations*. As California, Scotland is characterised as being a country with important cultural values that translate into the celebration of the Tartan Day in Scotland Week. "That's something that means a lot to Scotland and it means a lot to Californians as well".

Another image of Scotland is its ambitious character: "desire we have in Scotland not just to create a fairer and a more prosperous country, but also, as a relatively small country, to play a big part and make a positive contribution to the world we live in". One of its high standards is given by the quality of its higher education institutions: "For Scotland, as for California, our universities are incredible cultural, social and economic assets". In this context, and not only, the Scots are characterised by determination: "We are determined to beat Luxembourg to the top spot sometime soon". Luxembourg is apparently on the top of the list for now.

Scotland strives to be seen as an open nation, tolerant to immigrants, with an "out of the box" thinking. It promotes equality, being more than vocal about it, for it has already taken measures in this regard. One of these measures has been promoting immigration, but Scotland went deeper into the problem, also addressing matters of gender equality: "We will discuss Scotland's Women in Conflict programme. It prepares 50 women every year to play a part in mediation and conflict resolution. [...] The programme is Scotland's way of trying to act on the UN Security Council resolution 1325, which recognises that women bear many of the worst consequences of civil war and conflict, but are too often excluded from efforts at finding peace and reconciliation". Thus Scotland is showing a great deal of

interest in humanitarian activities, mitigating for human welfare by concerning itself with climate change issues. Again, this nation proves to be a doer: "In 2012 Scotland became the first country to establish a climate justice fund for developing countries. It recognises that the people affected most by climate change are often those who have done the least to cause it".

However, much of Scotland's achievements as a nation are to be thanked to Nicola Sturgeon as elected First Minister of the Scottish Government. This is a visit to the US to promote Scotland, but also to promote the First Minister's image. As one of the agents of the discourse, she is too seen as active in solving problems. Through the personal pronoun "I", which mostly stands for Scotland as a nation, Sturgeon sometimes refers directly to herself. She is a determined woman, obviously capable of greatness, as her political position shows. She displays firmness, rendering a clear and coherent speech, and not being afraid to put a finger on the most complex of issues concerning her Government. She offers a glimpse of her own personal perspectives by inserting in the speech some of her opinions. She is careful enough to speak about herself in a manner that does not strike the audience as self-praise. This is how she mentions her contribution to Scotland's best choices: "Shortly after I became First Minister, the Scottish Government revised our economic strategy. One of the biggest changes that we made was deciding to promote equality alongside economic competitiveness". Through a use of personal pronouns, she includes herself in the speech: "And [...] another issue that is very close to my heart, and that is the issue of gender equality; / I can assure you; / nobody, least of all me; / And I hope that many of you choose to live [...] in Scotland; / I'm going to claim that as a Scottish connection".

Leaving aside Nicola Sturgeon and her nation, there can be observed the use of passive constructions in describing the other agents. The United Kingdom for example is seen as the "other", not as part of Scotland, introduced by "we" like the US is in the many of the associations. The United Kingdom, namely the British nations and the UK Government, is held responsible for a state of *uncertainty* and *anxiety* in Scotland: "we were outvoted by the rest of the UK. As a result of that referendum the UK was the only member state that was not represented at the 60th anniversary celebrations for the Treaty of Rome". Scotland complains about having to leave the EU thanks to the UK also because they have apparently ignored the Scots and their proposals as to what could have been preferable to them in the context of Brexit. The Scots have come up with alternatives and solutions which have been disregarded by the British political leaders: "Scotland and the Scottish Government has proposed, over the past few months, different ways in which the UK could opt to retain membership of what is called the single market, without being part of the EU. [...] But those proposals have been disregarded by the UK

Government". While building a rather negative image of the United Kingdom, this is not the case of the European Union, which is presented in a positive light. It has already been discussed how Scotland considers it part of its national identity, acknowledging its contribution to Scotland's prosperity as a nation: *EU membership [...] speaks to our sense of who we are.*

5. Conclusions

This chapter aimed to present the speaker's standpoint. The whole speech is built on the idea of Scotland as a nation reaching out to political friends, one that sees itself full of potential, capable of making a difference in the world with or without belonging to a supranational organization. We have seen how agency is attributed in the text, introducing all the relevant social actors and topics of discussion.

As for the last of the discourse elements in Tonkiss' model of analysis, emphasis, and silences, throughout the present chapter we have seen what are the most important issues approached by Nicola Sturgeon in her speech. Her discourse stresses on its own key topics which, as previously discussed, represent the very elements she deals with in her governance. They all stand for Scotland's identity and each has its importance and place, just like Scotland has its place in the world. The discourse is meticulously touching a variety of relevant topics and it does not seem to leave anything out. This discourse is not a silent one, but on the contrary, it is an international political speech which is striving to deliver a strong message that is expected to globally echo.

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