Analysing national identity in political discourse

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CONTEXT AND GOALS OF THE STUDY

• Interviews with Scottish politicians on the issues of Scottish independence and EU membership

• Specific sample: all elections candidates for the British Parliament in a single Scottish constituency

• Question: How to analyse this data in order to achieve the research’s goals?
  - thematic analysis & discursive analysis (qualitative)
  - SAGA (qualitative & systematic)
CONTEXT AND GOALS OF THE STUDY

- **Goal 1**: What is the role of national identity and related constructs in relation to support for separatism and integration?

  => Appraising the relevance of a specific model about the determinants of political attitudes to separation/integration

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<tr>
<th>Compatibility vs. Incompatibility</th>
<th>Power vs. Powerlessness</th>
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<tr>
<td>Identity undermining vs. enhancement</td>
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<table>
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<th>National identification</th>
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<td>Support for Separatism vs. integration</td>
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Context and goals of the study

- Goal 2: How are (national) identities and social reality *strategically* constructed to promote political goals?

- How can the data be used to answer these questions?
  ⇒ Group identities as rhetorical tools for political mobilization: People construct identities and the social/political context in order to promote their political projects (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996, 2001)

  ⇒ If the constructs of the model are indeed key dimensions in shaping attitudes towards separation/integration, they should be the central focus of argumentation by those whose goal is to mobilize towards separation/integration (goal 1)

  ⇒ And there should be a strategic consonance between their specific accounts of and political goals (goal 2)
Illustrations

SCOTTISH NATIONALIST (PRO-INDEPENDENCE)

...we were always a great European nation pre-EU, with a lot of links, especially with the French, the old alliance...great links with the Hanseatic states, the Baltic...we’ve always been far more international, we’ve always looked to Europe....It’s the whole cultural mindset, we’ve always looked out. Scots have always been great travellers, we’ve always been innovators, explorers, adventurers, we’ve always gone out to the world, come back, there’s always been that great mix. England, traditionally, for whatever reason, has always been slightly more into this island breed, protect our frontiers and hell mind anyone who comes and tries to change this. We always have a little chuckle up here, in the 1997 election, John Major tried to save this government, talked about a thousand years of British history. And we’re sort of going, what is this?

• => Scotland as outward-looking vs. England as inward-looking
• => No Common British history
Illustrations

CONSERVATIVE (PRO-UNION)

Well, they have a lot in common, a lot they have in uncommon, as far as you like (laugh). There’s a lot of arguments about Bannockburn and everything else that goes on, but it’s almost an amusement...And, you know, Scotland and England got on fine. When there is an outside threat, they pull together better. Lords fought together in wars, etc...So that’s, we’ve done things together, we have the British Commonwealth and those things don’t go away...we’re on the same lump of land, we’ve been there for, the historical connections have always been, you know France, and Scotland versus England or the rest of it, but that’s quite distant now. But I mean the main Commons Act is a more recent common history of 300 years of the union. And the trades and the links, family links, links all way down from the Crown through the parliaments into the families.

• => Commonalities between Scotland/England trumps differences
• => Making the same dimensions of identity/history central vs. peripheral
Context and goals of the study

• Why not using quantitative methods (e.g. survey, quantitative content analysis)?
  - Combination of different methods is good (triangulation)
  - Quantitative methods require simplification of meaning
  - Detailed attention to meaning is needed to:
    - Make some specific theoretical points (e.g.: practical vs. symbolic dimensions of identity)
    - Interpret and classify properly the accounts of the respondents
METHOD AND ANALYSIS

• 2 interrelated steps of analysis:
  - Classification of arguments for separation/integration in terms of the type of accounts of social reality they rely on (thematic analysis)
  - Analysis of accounts (discursive analysis):

• Classification (coding):
  - Start with theoretically-led but empirically open categories
  - Iterative process
  - Possibility of emerging categories

• End result: 4 types of accounts (themes) are used to support arguments
  - A. Impact of superordinate group membership
  - B. Relationship with outgroup(s)
  - C. What do the Scots want
  - D. Reality/artificiality of groups
METHOD AND ANALYSIS

• Analysis:
  - What do the accounts do (political implications) and how do they do it (e.g. drawing boundaries, using specific definitions of identities, etc.)
  - Do the accounts used to support arguments correspond to theoretical expectations? (goal 1)

• More specifically:
  - A. Is the impact of superordinate group membership argued in terms of undermining or enhancing of national identity?
  - B. Are the relationship with outgroup(s) is defined in terms of (in)compatibility and power?
  - C. Does ‘what do the Scots want’ depends on ‘who they are’, i.e. identity definitions?
  - D. Does the Reality/artificiality of groups depend on the existence/absence of a common identity?
The importance of detailed attention to meaning

• Specific point about the impact of the superordinate group:
  - Identity undermining is threat to the expression of identity in practices (identity enactment)
  - It is Different from pure symbolic/intra-psychic threat because it is also a practical threat (we want to feel different vs. we want to be able to act differently)
  - Allow to bridge the divide between identity/symbolic vs. material factors.
The importance of detailed attention to meaning

- **SCOTTISH NATIONALIST CANDIDATE (PRO-INDEPENDENCE)**

It’s the whole cultural mindset, we’ve always looked out...the Scots have always been a very gregarious people. We like company....we are outgoing, we like to party. And I think the basic thing is we like to look out. We don’t like to look in. We’ve been forced, perhaps, over the last years, to look inwards, again, because of the problems that have started to face us.
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=> Interaction (not juxtaposition) between cultural/symbolic and material dimensions
The importance of detailed attention to meaning: “In bed with an elephant”

What is the relationship between Scotland and England?

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT (PRO-DEVOLUTION):
• The relation between Scotland and England...is...like being in bed with an elephant. Essentially, you have a symbiotic, emotional relationship, but the other partner is infinitely bigger and stronger, and is occasionally, just to continue the metaphor, when the other partner turns over in bed, sometimes it does so without having regard to the fact that they crush (slight laugh), they may crush the partner that’s in bed with it.
The importance of detailed meaning: “In bed with an elephant”

What is the relationship between Scotland and England?

SEPARATIST PAMPHLET:

• *It is like a man having to share a bed with an elephant...It is an experience which can be dangerous or very uncomfortable and lead to pressures which are difficult to avoid or resist. The elephant can use its sheer bulk and weight to flatten resistance altogether. This can happen even by accident or without any malicious intention. If there is a conflict of interests or of tastes, weight is liable to predominate. This sort of experience is common whenever a country has a neighbour much larger and wealthier than itself. (p.5)...It was the misfortune of Scotland to have on her border a country which was not only larger, and therefore more powerful, but which was, for centuries, particularly aggressive and expansionist. (p.6)*

=> Same metaphor has different political implications as a function of how it is used and interpreted
Looking at identity constructions in strategic terms

• 2 methods can be used to establish the strategic dimension
  - 1. Looking at intra-individual variability
  - 2. Establishing systematic patterns of inter-individual variability
1. Intra-individual variability in identity constructions

- e.g. Different constructions used for different audiences, before vs. after elections, to address different counter-arguments, etc.

PRO-DEVOLUTION LABOUR CANDIDATE

- *I think the Conservative government was...extremely damaging to the Union, the years under Thatcher...it did bring frustration and resentment...because Scotland holds its public services quite dear, cuts to the public services all that kind of thing, was quite difficult...’*

  => Argument for more autonomy

- *I think before the parliament was established, there was this big feeling that Scotland is a more progressive, a more tolerant, a more socially inclusive society, it treasures its public services more...I’d like to think that Scotland was, but I don’t think it is. I think the concern of the Scottish parliament is that Scotland is actually becoming more insular, more parochial, rather than being forward looking’*

  => Counter-argument against independence
2. Systematic patterns of inter-individuals variability

• Why systematic?
  - Patterns of inter-individual variability could reflect stable inter-individual differences in beliefs
  - Simple qualitative study of political discourse is open to possible criticisms of selectivity:
    - Between-respondents
    - Within-respondents

• To address these limits:
  - Systematic sample
    - all candidates for the same constituency in 2001 U.K. parliament election)
  - Systematic analysis of all their arguments
    - SAGA – Structural Analysis of Group Arguments (Reicher & Sani, 1998)
2. Systematic patterns of inter-individuals variability

First step: summarizing accounts, e.g.

CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE

If everyone in Britain agreed, within a federal Europe on, you know a particular point, and then say that’s important to us, we want to do that, everyone here said that, but the rest of Europe didn’t want to do that from a federal state, that would be it, we couldn’t do it. And that’s that kind of loss of identity, that I think it’s unnecessary to go down that route...|...|...we have our different identities, and we’re quite proud of it, and they’re proud of theirs and you can’t destroy that, it’s the freedom of choice to act in our own way.

ACCOUNT SUMMARY:

Being in the EU leads to a loss of identity, as it undermines the ‘freedom to act in our own way’
2. Systematic patterns of inter-individuals variability

First step: summarizing accounts, e.g.

SNP CANDIDATE
I think that is the biggest difference that it would make as an independent member. Confidence, self-belief, being able to be part of it. At the moment, I suppose it’s like being, being the perpetual, perpetually on the substitute bench. You know you’re a good player, and you had plenty of practice with your mates, but you never get the opportunity to actually go out there and show what you can do. Being an independent member of the European Union would give us a chance to get up off the substitute bench, and show what we can do.

ACCOUNT SUMMARY:
Being independent in Europe would improve Scots’ self-confidence
Contingent vs. essential impact

- **For E.U. supporters, negative impact of E.U. is contingent**

  ⇒ **e.g.** SNP CANDIDATE argues that the damage to fishing and farming is due to the “lackadaisical attitude to Europe from Westminster”, and that the (English-led) British attitude is “standing on the outside throwing stones, saying we don’t like this, we don’t like that”, which is why they’re not “able to have a meaningful dialogue with any of the other members states, because they’re just so used to you, I think to use an English term, being a stroppy bugger.”

- **For E.U opponent, negative impact of E.U. is necessary/essential**

  ⇒ **e.g.** CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE argues that E.U is led by “a lot of unelected bureaucrats” who try to harmonise everything through binding treaties and with “what they think is a wonderfully academic perfect rule-book” that “doesn’t suit all circumstances”
**Second step: Mapping accounts against political positions**

**IMPACT OF EUROPE ON SCOTLAND**

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<th>Conserv.</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Lib Dem</th>
<th>SNP</th>
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<tr>
<td>Contingent impact of the EU</td>
<td>+/-</td>
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<td>Essential Impact of the EU</td>
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<td>Impact of ‘separatism’</td>
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- Expect account(s) of positive impact
- Expect account(s) of negative impact

Conservative => ‘Anti-Europe’
Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish Nationalist (SNP) => ‘Pro-Europe’
CONCLUSIONS

• Qualitative analysis allows for detailed attention to meaning, which may be empirically/theoretically important
• But qualitative analysis should not be used to make quantitative claims (e.g. criticisms of selectivity)
• SAGA allows to combine some of the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods
• But practical constrains: time consuming (small sample) and danger to loose the wood for the trees
• Recommendations:
  - Tailor the method to the question and not vice-versa
  - Importance to have a specific theoretical model and specific questions
  - Importance to read examples of analyses to get a ‘feel’ for it (methodological rules only get you so far)
  - Analysis mean analysis, not paraphrasing