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# Semantics of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ in relation to Brexit

## A semântica de ‘hard’ e ‘soft’ em relação ao Brexit

Vlatko Broz\*

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\* Doctor of Linguistics in a joint research programme (*cotutelle*) between the University of Zagreb (Croatia) and the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), a Chevening scholar from the University of Oxford (United Kingdom) and a postdoctoral researcher from the University of São Paulo (Brazil). Currently working as a visiting professor at the Federal University of ABC in Santo André (Brazil). E-mail: [vlatkobroz@gmail.com](mailto:vlatkobroz@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This paper analyses the semantics of ‘hardness’ and ‘softness’ in relation to the noun ‘Brexit’ in a news corpus. These concrete descriptions are frequently applied metaphorically to the complex political process of a nation exiting an economic union. First there is a discussion about what other kinds of things can be hard and soft in the NOW (‘News on the Web’) corpus, followed by an analysis of synonyms for *hard Brexit* and *soft Brexit*, evaluating their semantic prosody. Only four genuine collocations with the synonyms of *hard Brexit* have been found in the corpus, whereas seven have been found for *soft Brexit*. The paper shows how a corpus can be analysed to demonstrate the way in which the semantic prosody of a metaphorical description is negotiated in part through synonyms that exaggerate or mitigate its positive or negative associations.

**Keywords:** Semantics; Semantic Prosody; Corpus Linguistics; Hard Brexit; Soft Brexit; Synonymy

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a semântica da ‘dureza’ e ‘leveza’ em relação ao substantivo ‘Brexit’ em um corpus de notícias. Tais descrições concretas são frequentemente aplicadas de forma metafórica ao complexo processo político de saída de uma nação de uma união econômica. Inicialmente, há uma discussão sobre que outros tipos de coisas podem ser duras e leves no corpus NOW (‘Notícias na Web’), seguido de uma análise de sinônimos para o “hard Brexit” e o “soft Brexit”, avaliando sua prosódia semântica. Foram encontradas apenas quatro colocações genuínas como sinônimos de “hard Brexit” no corpus, enquanto para “soft Brexit” foram encontradas sete. O artigo mostra como um corpus pode ser analisado para demonstrar como a prosódia semântica de uma descrição metafórica é negociada, em parte, por meio de sinônimos que exageram ou mitigam suas associações positivas ou negativas.

**Palavras-chave:** Semântica; Prosódia semântica; Linguística de *corpus*; Hard Brexit; Soft Brexit; Sinonímia.

# 1. Introduction

In a referendum held on 23 June 2016, 17.4 million citizens of the United Kingdom (about one third of the population) voted to leave the European Union by a majority of 51.89% to 48.11% (MARTILL & STAIGER 2019:1, ADAM 2020: 106). In March 2017, the UK government announced that the UK would be withdrawing on 29 March 2019 after a two-year process, but that deadline was postponed three times (BOGDANOR 2019). Eventually, the UK formally left the EU on 31 January 2020. As the expression of one of the most contentious and prolonged issues in the recent political history of the United Kingdom, the neologism *Brexit* came to dominate news reports. The word was first coined in 2012<sup>1</sup> by blending the words *British* and *exit*, a very common word formation process in the English language (ALGEO 1977: 48, BAUER 1983, BRINTON & TRAUGOTT 2005: 41, FANDRYCH 2008). Lexical blending as a process of word formation is also well attested in other typologically different languages, such as Spanish (PIÑEROS 2000), Portuguese (GONÇALVES & ALMEIDA 2007) and Croatian (BRDAR- SZABÓ & MARIO-BRDAR 2008) to name but a few, but it is less productive as their inflectional morphology is more complex, so they exhibit less flexibility for such lexicalizations to occur. The domain of political upheaval in the UK has been particularly productive for English blends, with *Bremain* (*British* + *remain*) and *remoaners* (*remain* + *moaners*) entering the vocabulary alongside Brexit.

However, it is *Brexit* that will most likely be added to the list of such successful word formations in the future history of the English language. Many linguists have already discussed how it was coined in the first place (MAXWELL 2016, FONTAINE 2017: 1, LALIĆ-KRSTIN & SILAŠKI 2018, CHARTERIS-BLACK 2019: 32), all of them agreeing that it was modelled by analogy on *Grex*, a neologism that was attested earlier by Citigroup economist Ebrahim Rabhari in 2012 (BENCZES 2019:118), referring to the financial crisis and a possible withdrawal of Greece from the

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<sup>1</sup> The word *Brexit* was officially recognised by the Oxford English Dictionary in December 2016, defining its meaning as “the (proposed) withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, and the political process associated with it”. The OED’s first citation is from 2012: “P. Wilding in *blogactiv.eu* 15 May (blog, accessed 19 July 2016) (*title*) Stumbling towards the Brexit: Britain, a referendum and an ever-closer reckoning”. Furthermore, the OED says that the origin of the word is by compounding, which is not entirely precise, as the words *British* and *exit* were clipped before fused into a compound. Some linguists claim that the blending is not from *British* and *exit* but from *Britain*(’s) and *exit*.

Eurozone. After co-existing briefly with *Brixit* (LALIĆ-KRSTIN & SILAŠKI 2019: 223), another term invented to refer to the same event, *Brexit* quickly made an impact on the lexicon of the English language, reaching an impressive level of conventionalization and institutionalization.

While the *Oxford English Dictionary* currently recognizes *Brexit* only as a noun, it is already being used as a verb and an adjective in informal English. The term has already given derivations to new nouns for supporters of Britain's departure, such as *Brexiter* (a person who accepts Brexit with or without enthusiasm) and *Brexitteer* (a Brexit enthusiast) (JEFFRIES & MCINTYRE 2018). As the word extends in its syntactic uses and derivations, it also falls into regular patterns of phraseology. In an earlier article (BROZ 2019), I analysed the adjectival collocates of the noun *Brexit* in the NOW corpus, showing that *hard* and *soft* were two of the most frequent and significant adjectival collocates of the noun *Brexit*. Both are metaphorical: they are concrete descriptions of an abstract and complex process, and their use and meaning deserve further consideration. In the present article, I extend this analysis to consider further the semantics of 'hard' and 'soft' as they pertain to *Brexit*, and to explore how the semantic prosody of *hard* and *soft Brexit* is constructed in news discourse via the interaction of these phrases with their synonyms.

## 2. The NOW corpus and semantic prosody

The present study is based on data extracted from the NOW (News On the Web) Corpus, which is part of the Brigham Young University (BYU) collection of corpora, several of which offer users the option of building customised "virtual corpora". The option of extracting a large virtual corpus from an even vaster organised database of texts yields extensive, depersonalised and therefore more reliable data than, for example, a small corpus built by an individual researcher. Any corpus is always just a 'sample' of something one wants to investigate. However, as the NOW compiles news on a daily basis, it clearly shows various trends in the news. At the time of writing this article (8<sup>th</sup> June 2020), the NOW

corpus contained 10.2 billion words of data from web-based newspapers and magazines, dating from 2010.<sup>2</sup>

The availability to linguists of large corpora has allowed new topics of study to emerge, such as the investigation of the ‘semantic prosody’ of a term. Semantic prosody is the tendency for certain collocates to be associated with positive or negative connotations (LOUW 1993: 157). The original concept of semantic prosody was SINCLAIR’S (1987, 1991) but the idea has been taken up and expanded. According to MORLEY & PARTINGTON (2009: 141), “Semantic prosody is an expression of the innate human need and desire to evaluate entities in the world they inhabit as essentially *good* or *bad*.” There are other evaluative terms used in the literature, such as *positive* and *negative* (MCENERY & HARDIE 2012: 138) or *favourable* and *unfavourable* (PARTINGTON 1998: 65-66). STUBBS (1996: 176) grouped the evaluations produced by semantic prosody into three categories - *positive*, *negative* and *neutral*.

Whether we are encouraged to think that *soft* and *hard Brexit* are good or bad, favourable or unfavourable, positive or negative, or indeed neutral, will depend in part on the semantic prosodies of the adjectives *soft* and *hard*.

### 3. What else is hard and soft?

While previous research has investigated the collocational behaviour of, for example, terms in business English (e.g. WALKER 2001) and politics (e.g. MOHAMMED 2012), there has been so far scant attention paid to the behaviour of the noun *Brexit* as a phraseological element. As noted above, BROZ (2019) showed that *hard* and *soft* were two of the most frequent and significant adjectival collocates of the noun *Brexit*. As a first step towards further investigating the semantics of these collocates in their relation to Brexit, we can consider their dictionary denotations before running corpus searches to see what other nouns collocate with *hard* and *soft*. This process will shed light on the semantic prosody of the adjectives (cf. BEDNAREK 2008), and also give some insight into the metaphorical meanings of the adjectives when applied to *Brexit*.

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<sup>2</sup> It can be accessed via the Corpus of Contemporary American English (<https://www.english-corpora.org/now>).

The frequency of ‘hard’ Brexit is more than four times higher than that of ‘soft’ Brexit. A ‘hard’ Brexit is one in which some of the existing ties between the United Kingdom and the European Union are retained. The UK gives up membership of the EU’s single market and customs union and instead sets up its own trade deals. In a ‘soft’ Brexit scenario, the United Kingdom leaves the European Union but stays closely aligned to it, meaning staying in the single market and/or customs union, also possibly involving the continuation of free movement of people. These processes can be considered the denotations of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Brexit. The uses of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ in other contexts, however, impact upon its connotations, and so upon the possibility of the phrases having a positive or negative semantic prosody. We turn, then, to the meanings of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ and whether they are frequently used contexts that have positive or negative associations.

As we are investigating the metaphorical usages or meanings of these adjectives, it is useful to look first at their denotative meanings, on the basis that the literal meanings then extend semantically into the more abstract or metaphorical senses (e.g. SAMUELS 1972, LEE 2001). A sample of leading monolingual English language dictionaries indicates that we can draw up a list of at least 10 discrete senses for each of these two adjectives<sup>3</sup>. According to the online Cambridge English Dictionary<sup>4</sup>, the first meaning of the adjective *hard* is “not easy to cut, bend or break”. Another meaning is “difficult to understand or do”, but in this case its antonym is not *soft* but *easy*. The first meaning of the adjective *soft* is “easy to mould, cut or fold”, followed by “having a pleasant quality”.

While the primary senses of these adjectives are mainly concrete, if we search the NOW corpus for the nouns that typically collocate with those two adjectives by entering the search string “\_nn\* (noun.ALL)” in all the collocates section of the NOW interface<sup>5</sup>, Tables 1 and 2 show some interesting results.

<sup>3</sup> A lexicographer can list these meanings on the basis of frequency in a corpus or on the basis of how native speakers experience them. For example, the primary meaning of the noun “mouse” is a small rodent and the secondary meaning is that of a computer device. This secondary meaning is a metaphorical extension, obviously because there is a physical resemblance between the two. If we look up the frequencies of “mouse” in a corpus, we will probably be surprised to find that the secondary meaning is in fact more frequently found in texts than the primary meaning of that word.

<sup>4</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hard> as accessed on 30 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Their MI scores can be easily checked in my sample from the NOW. If the MI score is 3 or above, they are statistically strong collocates. However, there is an argument that for semantic prosody,

Table 1: The most frequent nominal collocates of the adjective *hard* in the overall NOW corpus<sup>6</sup>:

	Noun	Frequency
1	work	170,348
2	time	38,024
3	drive	20,457
4	times	15,570
5	way	14,622
6	rock	12,462
7	Brexit	11,587
8	border	11,451
9	drives	7,600
10	line	6,708

It is notable that very few of the collocates indicate that the literal, concrete sense of the adjective *hard* is conveyed. What does the adjective *hard* mean when it occurs in a combination with nouns such as those presented in Table 1? Is it “not easy to bend, cut or break”, “difficult to understand, do, experience, or deal with”, “needing or using a lot of physical or mental effort”, “not pleasant or gentle; severe”? For example, *hard drive* is actually short for *hard disk drive*<sup>7</sup> and refers to the actual disks inside the drive, so here we have the first, literal meaning, that of “not easy to bend, cut or break”. They are called so because earlier there were other types of magnetic storage disks that were flexible and that could be bent. For example, the floppy disk. The disks in hard drives are rigid and do not bend or flex.

*Hard rock* is a type of rock music with a strong beat in which drums and electric guitars are played very loudly. In this case, *hard* does not have a literal meaning, but something more in the domain of “needing or using a lot of physical or mental effort”. The sense of unrelenting intensity is what is being suggested

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frequency of collocation is more important than strength. The more common a collocational meaning is, the more likely that it is to have those connotative associations for the user.

<sup>6</sup> As accessed on 28 February 2020, since it changes daily.

<sup>7</sup> In a randomised sample of 20,547 instances, I could not find a context where *hard drive* cannot be replaced with *hard disk drive*.

here. The frequencies of these collocates' meanings have an impact on semantic prosody<sup>8</sup>. The same implications are valid for the adjective *soft*. A *soft drink* is neither necessarily easy to mould nor is its pleasant quality at stake. It is simply not *hard liquor*, or in other words alcoholic. One of the nouns from Table 1 that draws attention as being so frequent is the noun *border*. "Hard border" in the context of Brexit refers to reintroduction of authorised and physically controlled crossing points by customs officers and police. There was a lot of discussion in the negotiations whether a hard border would return between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which is the only land border that the United Kingdom has. The frequency of Brexit data in the NOW corpus might have pulled *hard border* into the top 10.

As announced earlier, let us discuss the most frequent nominal collocates of the adjective *soft* in the NOW corpus.

Table 2: The most frequent nominal collocates of the adjective *soft* in the NOW corpus<sup>9</sup>:

	Noun	Frequency
1	drinks	14,994
2	spot	8,247
3	power	7,813
4	drink	7,591
5	skills	7,224
6	tissue	5,107
7	landing	3,773
8	targets	3,512
9	loans	2,667
10	Brexit	2,552

Much like with the meanings of *hard*, the meanings of *soft* in actual discourse depart from the main dictionary definitions<sup>10</sup>. When we speak about *soft*

<sup>8</sup> I decided to comment on just a few of the results shown in Tables 1 and 2. Only those items have been selected that seemed to be more interesting for a discussion, more challenging for commenting and more surprising to find in top 10, as well as those that are more topic related.

<sup>9</sup> As accessed on 28 February 2020, since it changes daily.

<sup>10</sup> Some dictionaries explain what a *soft drink* is, some of them do not. Some of them give this



*drinks*, we refer to drinks that usually contain carbonated water, a sweetener and a natural or artificial flavouring. There is nothing negative in the connotation of ‘soft’ here; the contrast is with drinks that contain alcohol, namely *hard liquor*. It is interesting to note that the most frequent collocations (*soft spot*, *soft power*, *soft skills*) are in fact idiomatic expressions: they have a metaphorical nature. When contextualized, *soft skills* and *soft power* are easier to understand in the sense of what they may refer to. Where is the softness in drinks in relation to the softness in communication or leadership skills? Another noteworthy observation is that the collocations *hard Brexit* and *soft Brexit*, which only started occurring after the year 2016, have become so frequent that both of them have even made it to the top 10 of a corpus whose data starts in 2010.

In short, the most common collocates of *hard* and *soft* indicate that the adjectives are used to indicate a range of meanings, from difficulty and physicality to intensity and impermeability (*hard*) and from alcohol-free to ease and affection (*soft*). The simple use of the adjectives in a novel context, for example when applied to a neologism like *Brexit* should not, then, automatically trigger a unique meaning, nor, out of context, does either adjective necessarily suggest a positive or negative prosody. The positive and negative associations of *hard/soft Brexit* - its semantic prosody - are constructed in and through discourse, and it is to that process that we now turn.

## 4. Semantic prosody, synonymy and collocation

While the literature on semantic prosody referred to above focuses on collocations, in this article I consider the concept from a slightly different angle. When used in combination with a neologism like *Brexit*, I argue that the semantic prosody is not only conditioned by the memory of other combinations of *hard/soft* + noun. I argue that the semantic prosody is conditioned, and indeed negotiated, as part of a dynamic system where synonyms of *hard/soft* are also used with *Brexit* to cement, intensify or mitigate the positive or negative connotations of the

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explanation under additional sections dealing with phraseology and idiomatic expressions. The information about carbonated water usually does not appear in the list of meanings for the adjective *soft*, as for example in <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/soft>. There we have a list of 34 meanings for the adjective *soft*, none of which refer to *soft drinks*.

concept. We have seen, for example that ‘soft’ can mean ‘easy’ or possibly ‘gullible’ in phrases like ‘soft target’. The question arises whether synonyms of soft, like ‘easy’, also appear as collocates of *Brexit*. If so, then their occurrence will suggest which of the available senses of ‘soft’ are being privileged in Brexit discourse, and the network of collocational synonyms will give further insight into the semantic prosody of the terms *soft* and *hard* in conjunction with *Brexit*.

## 5. Synonyms for *hard* and *hard Brexit*

The NOW corpus automatically tags the following terms as frequently used synonyms of hard throughout the corpus (Table 3).

Table 3: Synonyms of the adjective *hard* in the NOW corpus<sup>11</sup>

		Frequency
1	Hard	2,151,886
2	Difficult	1,326,317
3	Firm	1,324,470
4	Fast	753,922
5	Tough	699,132
6	Powerful	640,050
7	Testing	427,489
8	Solid	412,898
9	Challenging	390,422
10	Severe	384,355
11	Violent	345,739
12	Demanding	272,018
13	Intense	239,721
15	Brutal	151,523
16	Harsh	138,972

<sup>11</sup> As accessed on 3 October 2019, since it changes daily.

The collocations of synonyms of ‘hard’ with *Brexit* are only a subset of the fuller range of adjectives shown in Table 4. The fact that only a certain group of these synonyms collocate with *Brexit* gives some insight into which senses of ‘hard’ are foregrounded in Brexit discourse.

To explore the semantic prosody of *hard* and *soft* as common collocates of *Brexit*, I searched for ‘[=soft/hard Brexit]’. This search specifically identifies those synonyms of *hard/soft* that the program identifies as being collocates of *Brexit* (see Table 4). Several issues can now be explored. What is the relationship between the members of the semantic field? When and why is a *hard Brexit* a *brutal Brexit*? Are they really synonyms?

There are other terms that express the denotative concept of *hard/soft Brexit* but they are not picked up by the tagger. These will be discussed in due course.

The semantic prosody suggested in the Tables below is to a certain extent intuitive: it is reasonably easy to argue that the adjectives ‘difficult/harsh/brutal’ are usually negative in meaning, but ‘tough/challenging/demanding’ for example could be positive or negative, depending on the context of use. The characterisation of the semantic prosodies, therefore, is provisional, errs on the side of caution and is open to further discussion.

Table 4: Synonyms for *hard Brexit* in the NOW corpus<sup>12</sup>

		Frequency	Semantic prosody
1	Hard Brexit	11,436	
2	Tough Brexit	78	Neutral
3	Difficult Brexit	70	Negative
4	Challenging Brexit	27	Neutral
5	Harsh Brexit	17	Negative
6	Severe Brexit	11	Negative
7	Brutal Brexit	11	Negative
8	Demanding Brexit	9	Neutral
9	Intense Brexit	8	Neutral
10	Firm Brexit	8	Neutral

<sup>12</sup> As accessed on 3 October 2019, since it changes daily.

Then I looked up the concordances for each collocation from Table 4. After sifting, or in other words dismissing the cases with tagging errors as well as those where we do not have a true collocation of an adjective with the noun *Brexit* but an n-gram in which that adjective is actually a collocate of the noun following the noun *Brexit*, it turned out that the number of genuine collocations (that is, when the adjective functions as a modifier of the headword, *Brexit*) was far lower than Table 4 suggests. Often, both the adjective and *Brexit* were functioning to modify another headword (e.g. ‘difficult Brexit decisions’). The following sections focus on the remaining cases, which are occurrences of phrases that are genuinely synonymous with *hard/soft Brexit*. These phrases are shown below, prior to a discussion of their semantic prosody.

a) ***Tough/difficult/challenging Brexit***: there are only 13 instances of the collocation *tough Brexit*, such as the following:

*...the Conservatives have a hard-Brexit candidate who’s argued for a tough Brexit.*  
*The CBI expects a tough Brexit without an agreement with a slump in the economy.*  
*If there is a tough Brexit that doesn’t allow for frictionless trade...*  
*But he warned that a tough Brexit would “impact on the profitability of the line”.*

The following are the only examples where we have *challenging Brexit* as a collocation:

*...to be the least vulnerable of the big four in the event of a challenging Brexit, ...*  
*...optimism in the face of a challenging Brexit is by no means limited to London,...*

b) ***Harsh/severe/brutal Brexit***: concordance lines that feature *harsh Brexit* as a collocation:

*...a vote for the Tories and a harsh Brexit.*  
*...suggesting that concerns a harsh Brexit will prevent the central bank from...*  
*...in which case a very harsh Brexit is possible...*  
*Pharmaceuticals unlikely to avoid a harsh Brexit.*  
*...when talks of a particularly harsh Brexit was most likely.*  
*...fear about a harsh Brexit in two years’ time.*  
*It may push for a harsh Brexit in order to intimidate and discourage...*  
*A less harsh Brexit would, predictably, have a lower cost.*

*One possible crisis is already in plain view - a harsh Brexit with restrictions on trade.*

The only two occurrences of *severe Brexit* as a collocation are:

*The EU27 will suffer from a traumatically severe Brexit.*

*The probability of a very severe Brexit can't be ruled out.*

There are seven occurrences of the collocation *brutal Brexit* such as:

*...so we're all having to think differently to stop Boris Johnson's brutal Brexit.*

*Faced with the stark reality of a brutal Brexit on October 31,...*

*...the discussions could end in a "brutal Brexit" under which talks collapse...*

*Fear that the UK could end up with a "brutal Brexit" because of the fragility of Theresa May.*

*...breakdown in the UK has increased - a brutal Brexit without any agreement at all...*

c) ***Demanding/intense/firm Brexit***: the adjective and noun are again combined to modify a different headword in one example: *the demanding Brexit negotiations*. There are no examples of the collocation *demanding Brexit* where *demanding* is an adjective modifying *Brexit* as a headword. All the other concordances are tagging errors where *demanding* is actually a verb, such as the following:

*...signed a letter to May demanding Brexit happens in the next few months.*

*Meanwhile an online petition demanding Brexit be halted passed...*

*Demonstrations demanding Brexit be implemented...*

Similarly, there are no examples of the collocation *intense Brexit* where the noun is the headword. Both are combined as modifiers in: *intense Brexit negotiations*; *intense Brexit standoff*; *intense Brexit fears*; *intense Brexit debate*.

Finally, and once again, there are no examples of the collocation *firm Brexit* where the adjective modifies *Brexit*. The adjective *firm* occurs only as a modifier of the noun following *Brexit*, where *Brexit* is also a premodifier of that noun, e.g.: *firm Brexit stance*; *firm Brexit opponent*; *a firm Brexit view*.

In total, then, there are only four 'genuine' examples of Brexit being pre-modified by synonyms of *hard*. In all of these instances, the synonyms have a markedly negative semantic prosody. These adjectives are *tough*, *harsh*, *severe*

and *brutal*. These are not just synonyms of *hard*, they intensify the idea of a hard Brexit having a negative outcome. That is, they act to cement the negative semantic prosody of *hard Brexit*.

The semantic analyser in the NOW corpus does not list the frequent adjectival collocates of *Brexit* such as *no-deal* and *disorderly*, which are conceptually close to *hard* but yet have a difference in meaning. The synonyms program does not pick them up. A *hard Brexit* could include some kind of agreement with the EU, but in a *no-deal Brexit* there is no agreement at all.

There are collocations such as *disorderly Brexit* and *chaotic Brexit*, which are far more frequent in the corpus than those from the synonyms list. The search for synonyms [=no-deal Brexit] yields no results, but [=disorderly Brexit] does give some results such as the following:

Table 5: Synonyms for *disorderly Brexit*<sup>13</sup>

		Frequency	Semantic prosody
1	Disorderly Brexit	1,471	Negative
2	Chaotic Brexit	434	Negative
3	Messy Brexit	126	Negative
4	Unruly Brexit	13	Negative
5	Muddled Brexit	10	Negative
6	Disordered Brexit	7	Negative
7	Confused Brexit	4	Negative
8	Wild Brexit	3	Negative
9	Rowdy Brexit	1	Negative
10	Rebellious Brexit	1	Negative

d) ***Disorderly Brexit***: the collocation *disorderly Brexit* typically appears in negative contexts:

...the possibility of a disorderly Brexit resurfaced...

...warnings about a disorderly Brexit...

<sup>13</sup> As accessed on 3 October 2019, since it changes daily.

*...fears of a disorderly Brexit...*  
*...an incentive to avoid a disorderly Brexit...*  
*...looming menace of a disorderly Brexit...*  
*...the risk of a disorderly Brexit...*  
*...to avert a potentially disorderly Brexit...*  
*A disorderly Brexit would threaten the loss of skilled manufacturing jobs...*  
*The overwhelming majority do not want to see a disorderly Brexit...*  
*...fears of global recession and a disorderly Brexit...*

The semantic prosody of *disorderly* is negative, as orderliness and deals are usually desirable. There are 1,471 instances of this collocation in the corpus. *Disorderly Brexit* does not occur with a noun following in any of the concordances.

e) **Chaotic Brexit:** the collocation *chaotic Brexit* appears 394 times in interesting negative contexts such as the following:

*...renewed concerns about a chaotic Brexit*  
*...the possibility of a hard and chaotic Brexit...*  
*A chaotic Brexit could do great damage to ordinary people...*  
*...a chaotic Brexit would hurt the poor...*  
*Some in the EU might prefer the pain of a chaotic Brexit over further turmoil*

There are 40 instances of *chaotic Brexit* occurring with a noun following, such as: *chaotic Brexit process*; *chaotic Brexit negotiations*; *chaotic Brexit uncertainty*.

f) **Messy Brexit:** there are 112 instances of the genuine collocation *messy Brexit* in the corpus:

*a messy Brexit has the potential to hurt the EU...*  
*...likely to be affected by a messy Brexit...*  
*...Britain is on the brink of a messy Brexit...*  
*...a potentially messy Brexit looming...*  
*...the risk that a messy Brexit poses to the City...*

There are 14 examples of the combination *messy Brexit* with a noun following, such as: *messy Brexit divorce*; *messy Brexit outcome*.

f) **Unruly Brexit**: there are four instances of the genuine collocation *unruly Brexit* in the corpus:

*...fears of an unruly Brexit should have been put to bed,...*

*...new worries about the possibility of an unruly Brexit came to the fore.*

*...the potential of an unruly Brexit in its latest outlook...*

*...as the potential for an unruly Brexit increases...*

g) **Muddled Brexit**: there are six examples of a *muddled Brexit*:

*...as damaging as a hard Brexit is a muddled Brexit.*

*...to prevent Britain slipping towards a “muddled Brexit”....*

*...leaves the country vulnerable to a ‘muddled Brexit’.*

And in four concordances there is actually a noun following: *muddled Brexit policy*; *muddled Brexit message*; *muddled Brexit talks*.

h) **Confused / Disordered Brexit**: this word sequence does not occur as a genuine collocation but only with a noun after Brexit, as in: *confused Brexit position*; *confused Brexit stance*; *confused Brexit policy*. The examples for *disordered* are:

*...in the case of a disordered Brexit...*

*...the threat of a disordered Brexit...*

i) **Wild Brexit**: this collocation has a very low frequency, appearing in examples such as:

*...having irritated Eurosceptics by confronting their wild Brexit with reality...*

*...in the prospect of a wild Brexit that threatens to damage everyone...*

j) **Rowdy Brexit**: this combination appears only once, not as a collocation but with a noun following, where *rowdy* is used to describe a person:

*A lot of rowdy Brexit MEPs to be elected to the European Parliament*



Where the adjectives in question genuinely modify *Brexit* and not the following noun, they can be understood as functioning as ‘new synonyms’ of *hard* in the context of *Brexit*. And so, in this context *hard* does not just exist in relation to *tough*, *harsh*, *severe* and *brutal*, but also in relation to *disorderly*, *messy*, *chaotic* and so on. As the semantic prosody of *hard Brexit* develops through discourse, so too do the semantic relations that *hard* enters into with other modifiers. This significance of this process of development is discussed further in Section 7.

## 6. Synonyms for *soft Brexit*

Table 6: Synonyms for *soft Brexit* in the NOW corpus<sup>14</sup>

		Frequency	Semantic prosody
1	Soft Brexit	2,437	
2	Smooth Brexit	288	Positive
3	Flexible Brexit	16	Positive
4	Sensitive Brexit	15	Positive
5	Delicate Brexit	10	Neutral
6	Easy Brexit	9	Positive
7	Weak Brexit	4	Negative
8	Limp Brexit	3	Negative
9	Pathetic Brexit	2	Negative
10	Elastic Brexit	2	Neutral
11	Wet Brexit	1	Negative

The synonyms of *soft* that are used to modify concepts other than *Brexit* are *kind*, *quiet*, *tender*, *subtle*, *pleasant*, *flowing*, (all of which have a positive semantic prosody) as we can see in the following table:

<sup>14</sup> As accessed on 3 October 2019, since it changes daily.

Table 7: Synonyms of the adjective *soft* in the NOW corpus

		Frequency
1	Kind	1,690,331
2	Low	1,496,190
3	Easy	1,091,067
4	Weak	283,244
5	Soft	274,254
6	Quiet	268,089
7	Sensitive	248,728
8	Tender	179,929
9	Smooth	178,643
10	Wet	151,008
11	Flexible	140,175
12	Subtle	92,269
13	Pleasant	86,214
14	Flowing	84,342
15	Gentle	76,810
16	Delicate	67,000
17	Pathetic	42,141
27	Limp	15,123
29	Elastic	13,548

When we take a look at the frequencies of the use of these synonyms to describe *Brexit*, they are in fact all very low, below 16 occurrences, except for *smooth Brexit* (288), in a corpus of 9 billion words.

a) ***Smooth Brexit***: the examples for *smooth* are:

... *prospect of a smooth Brexit*...

... *hopes of a smooth Brexit*...

... *chances of a smooth Brexit*...

... *in the event of a smooth Brexit*...

... *if a smooth Brexit takes place*...

... *a managed, orderly and smooth Brexit*...

... *negotiate a smooth Brexit*...

We can also find this collocation as a premodifier to a noun that refers to an abstract idea: *smooth Brexit outcome*; *smooth Brexit scenario*; *smooth Brexit transition*; *smooth Brexit process*; *smooth Brexit negotiations*.

b) **Flexible Brexit**: the examples for *flexible* are:

*She is also in favour of a flexible Brexit*...

*A flexible Brexit is possible*...

*Ms Sturgeon is due to unveil proposals for a “flexible Brexit”*...

*... raise the subject of a “flexible Brexit”*...

*... unveil proposals for a “flexible Brexit”*...

Much like with *smooth*, it occurs as a premodifier to a noun that refers to an abstract idea: *flexible Brexit extension*; *flexible Brexit delay plan*; *flexible Brexit deal*.

c) **Sensitive Brexit**: it does not appear as a collocation because there is always a noun following the word *Brexit* as in the following examples: *sensitive Brexit negotiations*; *sensitive Brexit issue*; *sensitive Brexit topic*.

d) **Delicate Brexit**: *Delicate Brexit* also does not appear as a collocation because there is always a noun following, as in: *delicate Brexit negotiations*; *delicate Brexit talks*.

e) **Easy Brexit**: The collocation *easy Brexit* occurs in the corpus but with very low frequency, as in the following examples:

*... the easy Brexit they promise*...

*... will not facilitate an easy Brexit*...

*... there will be a soft, easy Brexit*...

*... Berlin dashes hopes of easy Brexit*...

*... the precedent of an easy Brexit*...

f) **Weak Brexit:** *Weak Brexit* appears as a collocation only once:

... the above scenario would prevent a weak Brexit or no Brexit at all...

In the other five concordances there is a noun following, such as in: *weak Brexit stance*; *weak Brexit economy*.

g) **Pathetic Brexit:** *Pathetic Brexit* has an extremely low frequency and does not appear as a collocation but only with a noun following, such as in: *pathetic Brexit politics*; *pathetic Brexit rhetoric*.

h) **Elastic Brexit:** This collocation appears only twice in the corpus, as in the following example:

An 'elastic Brexit' could see the whole of the UK quit EU...

i) **Limp/Wet Brexit:** These collocations occur only once in the corpus (the so-called *hapax legomena*):

*Theresa May leads outrage over BBC paying men more than women as Corbyn threatens forced pay cuts limp Brexit.*

*Conservative volunteers were going on strike, sickened were they by her wet Brexit.*

In total, there are seven genuine synonyms of *soft* being used to modify *Brexit*. These collocates are *smooth*, *flexible*, *easy*, *weak*, *limp*, *elastic* and *wet*. In some instances, the semantic prosody is positive (*smooth*, *flexible*, *easy*) but in others the prosody is negative (*weak*, *limp*, *wet*), all of which suggest lack of strength or resolve.

As with the collocations of 'hard' Brexit, the variations in the semantic field of 'softness' are realised through discourses that draw upon the lexical and semantic resources of 'hard' and 'soft' in English to take up ideological stances with respect to the political fact of Brexit. This realisation is discussed in the following section.

## 7. Discussion

Sections 5 and 6 above report a range of synonyms of *hard* and *soft* that have been used to modify *Brexit* in the news discourse around that contentious topic. The presence and use of these synonyms in the corpus of news discourse raises some practical and theoretical questions about the nature of collocation, semantic prosody, and the ideological use of lexical members of a semantic field in news discourse. These issues are discussed in the present section.

While the exact nature of semantic prosody is itself contested, the psycholinguistic phenomenon is generally understood to refer to the gradual assimilation by a node such as *regime* the connotations of its frequent collocates, such as *brutal* or *repressive*. The present study raises further issues about the nature of semantic prosody in that it considers the ways in which the node *Brexit* combines with a range of lexical modifiers in the same semantic fields. We know that *hard* and *soft* are the most frequently used descriptive collocates of *Brexit*, and so we argue that the establishment of these modifiers in public discourse opens up the possibility of writers using different lexical items in the semantic fields of ‘hardness’ and ‘softness’ to characterise a complex political process - namely, the establishment of a new relationship between the U.K. and the E.U. - as positive or negative. As we saw in Section 3, *hard* and *soft* come to *Brexit* discourse with their own semantic prosodies, derived from their use in other domains (e.g. *hard drugs*, *soft drinks*). These positive and negative prosodies may be intensified or mitigated through the use of alternative lexical items from the semantic fields of hardness and softness. In some cases, the chosen collocate, such as *limp Brexit* is infrequently used in the corpus. Even so, this selection of an item in the semantic field of ‘softness’ is clearly strategically chosen to convey the negative impression of weakness and flaccidity. We argue that such *infrequent* collocations are also of interest to scholars of semantic prosody because they indicate how lexical members of a semantic field ‘compete’ to characterise a phenomenon positively or negatively: in this case, the synonyms of *hard* or *soft* whether frequent or infrequent, are deployed to portray a particular kind of *Brexit* as being attractive or undesirable.

Thus, in Section 5, we see that *hard Brexit* might be described in a number of ways ranging from *brutal Brexit* to *firm Brexit*, the former being unappealing and the latter more appealing to the reader. In Section 6, we see a similar positive and negative characterisation of soft Brexit that draws on alternative members of the semantic field of softness, e.g. *flexible Brexit* versus *weak Brexit*.

The present paper, then, argues that studies of semantic prosody should take into consideration not only nodes such as *Brexit* and their frequently occurring collocates (i.e. *hard/soft*) but also nodes and the less frequently occurring members of the semantic field to which frequently occurring collocates belong (e.g. *harsh/limp*). The choice of the infrequently occurring collocate within the same semantic field is evidently part of the discursive process of characterising a phenomenon as positive or negative.

The paper also raises theoretical issues about the nature of synonymy. *Hard Brexit* is, in context, a synonym for *no-deal Brexit*. Arguably, then, the semantic relations of *hard* in the context of Brexit discourse extend to the ways in which hard Brexit is characterised in Brexit news items - *chaotic*, *messy*, *disordered*, etc. While these modifiers might not be considered as members of the same lexical set out of context, it is difficult to ignore their impact on the process of characterising the semantic prosody of *Brexit* in the context of discussions about this political event.

This exploration of the modification of *Brexit* in news discourse, then, raises hitherto unarticulated questions about the nature of semantic prosody. The concept depends on the assumption that proficient language speakers understand the relations between a node (*Brexit*) and its frequent collocates (*soft/hard*) in part through the accumulated positive or negative earlier contexts in which those collocates appear. This paper argues that there is in fact a broader network of associations to consider: not only the earlier uses of the collocates, but the connotations of other lexical members of the semantic field to which the collocates belong. Indeed, as we have shown, writers use particular members of those semantic fields (*soft* = *easy/weak*) in an active attempt to influence public perception of the political phenomenon. While the collocational use of the near synonyms is not so frequent, they are part of the discursive negotiation by which a positive or negative semantic prosody is established.

Once the study of semantic prosody has been broadened out to include synonyms and near-synonyms of frequently-occurring collocates, other questions arise. The question of what a synonym of a lexical item *is* depends in part on its use in discourse. While a thesaurus of English would not normally identify *no-deal* as a synonym of *hard*, *no-deal* and *hard* are obviously synonymous in the context of *Brexit*. Therefore, a fuller understanding of the semantic prosody of a word like *Brexit* needs to take into consideration the sense relations that its collocations fall into, in specific discursive contexts.

Finally, in the analysis of the collocation, the foregoing sections have shown that apparently related items, such as *delicate*, which seems to be a member of the same semantic field as *soft* probably need to be discounted, since closer analysis of the corpus shows that, when they co-occur, *delicate* and *Brexit* are both used to modify other items, namely *negotiations*. The question of whether the accumulation of such co-occurrences also impacts upon semantic prosody remains open, but the assumption in the present study is that if it does then it is probably weak.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has sought to extend the ways in which semantic prosody is analysed and understood. The expressions *hard* and *soft Brexit* are interesting in that two metaphorical descriptions are applied to a neologism: the concrete qualities of ‘hardness’ and ‘softness’ are the most frequent descriptive adjectives applied to a complex political process in a heated ideological debate. Embedded into the news discourse are politicians, pundits, editors and journalists’ formulations of these and related expressions, all of which, consciously or unconsciously, seek to suggest whether the concept should be viewed positively or negatively.

While most analyses of semantic prosody would analyse *hard/soft* in relation to the nouns they modify, and analyse the frequency of positive and negative associations, this paper takes a different approach. The descriptors *hard* and *soft* are seen as having a range of contextually defined meanings, and they are also seen as existing in relation to a web of synonymous expressions that can either

intensify or mitigate their positive/negative semantic prosody. Thus, *soft Brexit* can be associated with *easy Brexit* or with *weak Brexit*. Similarly, *hard Brexit* could be associated with *tough* or *powerful Brexit* but in fact is associated with *harsh* and *brutal Brexit*. In addition, a new set of synonymous relations, such as *hard=disorderly* are forged in the discursive domain of Brexit politics, just as the synonymous relation *soft=non-alcoholic* is forged in the domain of drinks.

The character and distribution of *hard/soft* and their synonyms show the ideological poles that separate the Brexiteers from Remainers. The synonyms used and coined can either exaggerate or mitigate the basic positiveness or negativeness of the most frequently occurring terms, *hard* and *soft Brexit*. What we see in the NOW corpus is not semantic prosody as a given quality of word or phrase but as malleable characteristic that, in relation to its synonyms, can be heightened or softened in and through the discourse, for persuasive ends.



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