

LANGUAGE



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Westminster on the Late Queen – Metaphor as a Discourse Vehicle in Condolence Debates After Queen Elizabeth II’s Death¹

Abstract. This paper investigates the patterns of discourse present in the record of condolence debates in Houses of the Parliament of the United Kingdom after the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Specifically, two research questions were examined. The study aims to prove specific patterns related to the expression of feelings caused by the Queen’s death, as well as those related to metaphors illustrating her. The study is conducted on the corpus of 249,882 tokens of written records of over 20 hours of speeches delivered in the British Parliament, subdivided into subcorpora for either House. The analysis employs the methodology of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), based mostly on Baker (2023) and includes the tools of word frequency lists, collocation search, and concordances. The resulting concordance lines were interpreted using conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 2011). The analysis proved that the discussion strategies of the speeches could be organised into three distinct categories. Across the lines of political divisions, the Queen was depicted as a figure to preserve the stability of the nation, an illustrious guide for all her subjects, particularly those in power, and finally a renowned example of Britain around the world and for all Britons. By employing those themes, the late Queen was presented as both a relatable figure and an extraordinary leader, evoking positive associations and setting her as an example to be followed both by the politicians and the electorate.

Keywords: corpus-assisted discourse studies, corpus linguistics, political discourse, monarchy, Queen Elizabeth II, metaphor, parliament debate

¹ About the author: Kamil Sikora is a postgraduate student at the University of Wrocław. This paper is based upon the undergraduate thesis submitted and defended in 2024.

1. Introduction and context

This article documents an investigation into discourses present in speeches delivered during the special parliamentary debates after the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022. It was a debate like no other. No actual policy was discussed, and all the attention of the Houses of Parliament moved onto the late Queen. These debates allowed the Members of Parliament and the Lords to pay tributes to the late head of state, as well as voice their feelings and evaluations of her reign. Such statements have not been usually taken into consideration by discourse analysts.

In this study, I search and examine metonymies and metaphors to which the late Queen was compared. They should indicate the general direction in which the discourses around the evaluation of the Queen's reign evolved. More precisely, the analysis shall focus on a few specific issues related to building of an institutional discourse on Queen's legacy. The purpose of the study is defined by three specific objectives. Firstly, this study defines and describes the general categories of metaphors used to discuss the Queen. Based on that, a general discursive image of the Queen and Parliament's understanding of her political and symbolical role. Furthermore, the parliamentary discourse is placed within the boundaries of the institutional discourse initiated by the Queen Elizabeth's death. The further discussion of the objective follows in the Discussion section.

The texts of the debates will be studied using an emerging methodology called corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS). It is a methodology where modern computational analytic techniques meet qualitative interpretation. CADS has been successfully used to investigate debates in the British Parliament on various contentious policies. Several noteworthy studies analyse discourses on the expansion of rights of LGBTQIA people (Bachmann 2011; Baker 2004; Findlay 2017), justification of war in context of Britain's involvement in Iraq War (Bayley and Bevitori 2009), British identity in relation to the EU (Riihimäki 2019), representation of migrants (Pérez 2023), understanding of the climate crisis (Willis 2017), and even Britain's stance on German reunification (Appleton 2021). Previous research focused mostly on actual policy debates, selecting controversial and consequential issues raised in plenary sessions. This work, however, focuses on the parliamentary debate, not exactly on political matters, but rather on the person of political importance.

There are records of tribute debates regarding the deceased members of the Royal Family, the earliest one in full being after the death of Queen Victoria, on 25 January 1901, three days after the Queen's death. Any earlier account proves that a debate has occurred, but it was not fully recorded in writing. The debate officially takes the form of proceedings over a document called 'the humble address', not to be confused with a traditional humble address as a parliament's response to the annual Speech from the Throne. This tradition continues until this day, with the last royal before the Queen being honoured by a full debate in both Houses was her husband, the late Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh, on 12 April 2021.

The utmost importance and authority of the Parliament as the supreme political institution of the country defines the impact of all discourses it addresses. Lords and MPs are considered not only within their conventional role as the representatives of the people in the democratic process, but very often as the opinion-makers on various current affairs. The remarks on the Queen's reign are particularly important because of their proximity to her resulting from the characteristics of the official duties as lawmakers. Many of them had had experiences of meeting the Queen due to their service or work before their election to Westminster. Finally, the Parliament is simply a part of the whole society of Britain. Therefore, their speeches are valuable not only as opinions of the politicians but also as Britons, in the same way as any other members of the public. Bearing this in mind, their discourse becomes both a summary of the nation's grief and mourning. Moreover, it is a political instrument of building an image and shaping a view of the British people on the Queen and, more remotely, the monarchy in general.

2. Methods of the study

Before any exact methodological explanation of corpus-assisted discourse studies is introduced, it is vital to nest this study within a hierarchy of linguistic disciplines. The disciplines relevant and integrated into the methodology of this study are corpus linguistics and discourse studies, incorporating methods and paradigms of linguistics and social studies, particularly political studies.

2.1. Corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS)

Following the collection of definitions provided by Baker (2023), corpus linguistics is a computer-based methodology used to analyse language. It involves studying a large body of language, often consisting of hundreds or thousands of carefully sampled and balanced texts, usually representative of a specific phenomenon. Corpus-based research depends on both quantitative and qualitative techniques, with association patterns representing quantitative relations and functional interpretation essential for analysis. Corpora are representative samples of a naturally occurring language, used as a standard reference for measuring claims about language.

Discourse is a broad denotation of a general use of language within a social boundary. The social aspect of discourse is crucial to properly define it within the emerging phenomenon of discourse studies. The study of discourse involves analysing how language is used to create meaning and shape interactions within specific contexts. Examining the social dynamics at work in discourse allows us to gain a better understanding of how language influences social structures, policies and practice and shapes our understanding of the world.

Both concepts are blended in the form of corpus-assisted discourse studies. This method combines the quantitative analysis of bodies of text with qualitative interpreta-

tion to uncover patterns and trends in language use within a particular social phenomenon. By utilising this interdisciplinary approach, valuable insights into the relationship between language, society, and culture can be gained. The exact mode of employment of the methodology and relevant theoretical works are provided later in this chapter.

In this study, I use Baker (2023) as a primary reference for the corpus-assisted discourse studies approach, or CADS. The book identifies useful methodological techniques, such as frequencies, dispersion, distribution, collocations, concordances, keywords, and annotation. The CADS approach offers several key advantages, particularly in addressing and mitigating researcher bias. Based on the irrefutable and reproducible data, it allows for higher reliability and plasticity of analysis. Additionally, this approach leverages the incremental effect of discourse, allowing for the examination of language use over extensive datasets, unveiling underlying discourses and revealing shifts in societal discourse positions. The approach also supports triangulation, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, promoting a more robust and nuanced understanding of discursive phenomena. According to the distinction proposed by Tognini-Bonelli (2001, 66–82), this study is corpus-based, that is here corpus serves as a repository of the examples for the linguistic tendencies identified before or during the formation of the corpus.

2.2. Conceptual metaphor (and metonymy) theory

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the main subject of this analysis are metaphors and metonymies used by the speakers to construct a specific discursive image of the Queen. To construct the final image, conceptual metaphor theory will be applied as an overarching interpretative method.

As argued by Lakoff and Johnson (2011), a metaphor is an important linguistic strategy to cognitively process and comprehend the world and its structures. By comparing to other observable phenomena of the world, the abstract ideas can become much closer to any recipient. This is particularly vital in the realm of politics, as all framing of political ideologies, values, and propaganda is done by metaphors. This study basis is ach on remarks delivered by Kövecses (2010). His essential stance is that the role of a metaphor (and metonymy) is make the discourse coherent. This analysis will focus mostly on proving what Kövecses calls an intratextual coherence, that is in proving that the general metaphors construct specific discourse directions, which together form a coherent stance on Queen Elizabeth II's reign.

2.3. The corpus

The object of this study is the verbatim record of the debates, held on 9 and 10 September 2022 in the Parliament of the United Kingdom, meeting at the Palace of Westminster in London. The report is extracted from *The Official Reports of Debates in the Lords and Commons*, more commonly known as the Hansard (House of Commons 2022a; 2022b; House of Lords 2022a; 2022b). According to Slembrouck (1992), The Official Report is

a comprehensive record of speeches made in all public proceedings of the Parliament. It provides a full report, in the first person, of all speakers taking part in the proceedings, defined as substantially verbatim (with corrections for mistakes and redundancies), while retaining all content that contributes to the meaning or argument of the speech. It is a trusted and authoritative source that provides a comprehensive account of parliamentary proceedings.

The texts mentioned in the previous subchapter have been divided into two corpora. The texts have been extracted from the Hansard archive in the form of simple text (.txt) files. The first corpus, containing the record of the debates in the House of Commons, consists of two files, one for each day of the debate. In sum, they contain 156,990 tokens, 10,773 types and 9445 lemmas. The respective corpus for the House of Lords also consists of two files, in the same manner as the other. Its values are 92,892 tokens, 7858 types and 6939 lemmas.

2.4. Analysis tools

The basic software employed for this study is #LancsBox (2021). It is a programme created by the Lancaster University research team for the analysis of corpora and language data. It employs several tools useful for the analysis of corpora. For the purposes of the study, the tools which find the most use are KWIC (traditionally known as a concordancer), collocation search, and frequency lists, especially for N-grams. These are the most common tools used in corpus linguistics, but they bear much more importance for CADS.

The KWIC tool, also known as ‘keywords in context’, enables the creation of detailed concordances for specific search terms. The concordances are comprehensive tables that showcase all instances of the searched word, along with the precise context of a few words both before and after the term. Such presentation of the contexts of the keywords is useful for discourse analysis, as it easily indicates the places the keyword appears, with immediate collocates and structure of the utterance.

The keyness values will also be verified throughout the analysis. Using statistical tests, usually log-likelihood, or LL for short (Brezina 2018), word frequencies in word lists are compared to identify more frequent words. These words are compiled into a keyword list, which is useful in suggesting lexical items for discourse analysis. A keyword or key N-gram is deemed more salient the higher its keyness statistic is.

3. Analysis

In data from a pilot study, the expressions *Queen was a(n)* or *she was a(n)* appear frequently (see Table 1). It is often followed by another noun, suggesting the use of metonymies and metaphors, which can be described more generally as a strategy of nomination (Wodak 2015, 73). This strategy allows speakers to add various modes of emphasis to a person or phenomenon in question.

| N-gram frequencies | Commons | | Lords | |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Absolute | Relative | Absolute | Relative |
| she pron be v a other | 93 | 5.92 | 42 | 4.52 |
| she pron be v the other | 62 | 3.95 | 30 | 3.23 |
| queen n be v a other | 29 | 1.85 | 11 | 1.18 |
| queen n be v the other | 14 | 0.89 | 7 | 0.75 |
| she pron be v an other | 10 | 0.64 | 9 | 0.97 |
| queen n be v an other | 6 | 0.38 | 3 | 0.32 |

Table 1. The frequencies of the queried N-grams from the subcorpora.

In this study, I select the concordance nodes in the form of multi-word expressions, more known in corpus linguistics as N-grams. The N-grams selected for this part of the study consist of the word signifying the Queen (either the noun *Queen* or the personal pronoun *she*), followed by the form of a verb *be*, and ending in an article anticipating a following noun phrase. The following tables present the list of the N-grams meeting the selection criteria. The same values are computed for the House of Lords subcorpus. The range of relative frequencies for both tables is similar. However, in the concordance query, they will all be treated equally as variants of one grammatical scheme of an expression. As tested with the log-likelihood test, the N-grams except *she was a* are not key between the subcorpora, so no significant difference between their appearances in the subcorpora is expected.

For the proper analysis I query the KWIC tool to find appropriate passages. The node is the lemma *be* and the left context is filtered for the presence of the words signifying the Queen (either the noun *Queen* or personal pronoun *she*). In the case of this set of concordance lines, I focus on the right context of the line, searching for nouns immediately following the node. The lines produced by KWIC can be grouped into several discourse categories. The categories presented below are common for both subcorpora. To illustrate the shared categories, I have compiled the list in the form of a table, signifying the respective metaphor categories and subcorpora (see Table 2).

| Association | House of Commons | House of Lords |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| The Queen as a leader | monarch, force, patron, servant, figurehead, diplomat, unifier, head, champion | monarch, guide, questioner, chief, leader, reconciler, head of state, role model, patron, force |
| The Queen as a woman | wife, mother, grandmother, lady, girl, princess, matriarch, grandma, feminist | mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, aunt, mother-in-law, wife, lady, princess |
| The Queen is a symbol | rock, beacon, messenger, example, icon, embodiment, epitome, act, exemplar, presence, symbol, lodestar, standard, heart, anchor, light | figure, light, lighthouse, personification, embodiment, the one, expression, miracle, gold standard, act of God, example, balm, glue, icon |
| Other | memory, part, radical, sequel, the very best, friend, human, visitor, member of family | asset, unionist, horsewoman, presence, breeder, 20-year-old, believer, member of family |

Table 2. The overview of the categories for respective subcorpora.

A significant part of metaphors appearing in the speeches are symbolic. This means more precisely that the Queen was compared to broadly known symbols, which align closely with the Queen's particular traits the speakers wanted to praise. There were several ways in which symbolic metaphors were used, namely in context of Queen being a unifier, a person of reliability, a constant in lives of her subjects, and an embodiment of Britishness.

The Prime Minister opened her speech by tributing the Queen as 'the rock on which modern Britain was built' (9 Sep, col. 493). Responding to the speech the Leader of the Opposition Keir Starmer said that in dark times of the COVID pandemic, the Queen 'was the messenger' (9 Sep, col. 495) who kept the morale of the nation high.

The parliamentary leader of the Scottish National Party, Ian Blackford, made use of several metaphors in his tribute. Commenting on her role as a head of the British state and of Commonwealth of Nations, he remarked that 'she was a unifying force'. When contemplating on the historical turbulences throughout her reign, Blackford observes, that 'to many she was a guiding light' but at the same time 'a thread of continuity running through the fabric of the Commonwealth' (9 Sep, col. 497).

Chris Matheson, a backbench Tory MP, hailed the late Queen for her steadfastness, being a 'rock of certainty and reliability around which the maelstrom of an ever-changing world would circle like a hurricane'. Matheson further elaborates on his symbols, adding comparing the Queen to 'a beacon of hopes, a fulcrum of dependability' in his speech. Naming all the historical developments in post-war Britain, especially those bringing social and technological progress, the Queen was lauded as 'an anchor of stability and security in the storm of the changes' (10 Sep, col. 683).

Similar remark was made by the Theresa May, who said that Queen Elizabeth 'was a constant throughout our lives, always there for us, uniting us at times of difficulty' (9 Sep, col. 502). Labour deputy Colleen Fletcher reflected on 'constant' and 'reassuring' presence (9 Sep, col. 581). Even the Welsh nationalist MP Liz Saville Roberts lauded the late Queen as 'a constant presence' and 'a figure of stability' (9 Sep, col. 516).

The speakers equated Queen's representation of Britain with being a symbolic embodiment. Conservative minister Sajid Javid told the Commons he considered the Queen the 'embodiment of the very best in public service' (9 Sep, col. 515). His party colleague George Freeman added that the late monarch was 'the exemplary spirit and embodiment of the very best of the United Kingdom' (9 Sep, col. 587), and Labour MP Chris Bryant also reflected on the Queen as 'the embodiment of our shared life as the United Kingdom' (9 Sep, col. 533).

The Queen's guidance and wisdom was compared to light. Also from the Conservative benches, Vicky Ford pondered that the Queen 'has been the rock beneath our feet in troubled times and the light that has shown us the way in the darkness' (9 Sep, col. 582). Fellow Tory Sally-Ann Hart further developed the idea, saying the late Queen 'shone a light to us all—a light that gave comfort (...) hope (...) a light of unity' (9 Sep, col. 645). Shabana Mahmood, Labour MP from Birmingham, considered the Queen 'guardian and its guiding light' for all the Commonwealth' (9 Sep, col. 527).

The symbolic strategy was used similarly in the House of Lords. Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House (Lord True, Conservative), while opening the debate, compared the Queen to an ‘anchor of stability’ as well as ‘our exemplar of conduct and courtesy’. Lord True also named the Queen ‘the embodiment of the United Kingdom’ (Lords, 9 Sep, col. 368). The trope of embodiment was repeated later by crossbench peer Lord Butler, Labour’s Lord Collins and Conservative Party’s Lord Wrottesley. Other notable phrases were uttered by Lord Ranger, calling her ‘a global icon’ (9 Sep, col. 526), and Lord Farmer comparing her to ‘a miracle of the modern age’ (9 Sep, col. 449). Baroness Helic (Conservative), after mentioning in passing that she is a former refugee from Iran, now working at the United Nations, remarked that the Queen’s impact transcended national origins—she was ‘a guiding light’ for all. Like ‘a lighthouse’ (9 Sep, col. 414), she illuminated the way through darkness, embodying duty and humility through her actions. In similar spirit, Lord Robertson meditated on Queen’s impact on the unity of the nation, considering her to be ‘a glue that keeps us all together’ (9 Sep, col. 497).

4. Discussion

The metaphors used in the debates could be grouped into three overarching categories. The first category groups metaphors which described the Queen as the source of stability and endurance (RELIABILITY IS GEOLOGICAL/NAUTICAL FIXITY). Here, the monarch is considered the permanent element of the British society, immune from any turbulence and crisis which might strike the nation by the comparisons to a rock or anchor, clearly associated with the richness of British nautical traditions. She is also associated with a power which keeps the society together and protects the social cohesion of Britain against all challenges (SOCIAL COHESION IS PHYSICAL ADHESION, as per the glue comparison). All British people are presented as united under one common monarch and universally affected by her passing, setting themselves as both a part and a representation of the mourning society.

Another metaphorical domain is one of guidance (GUIDANCE IS LIGHT). The Queen, as the summit of the political system of the United Kingdom, is concurrently considered the source of guidance, insight, and reference, illustrated by the universal symbolical meaning of light, lighthouse, lodestar etc. By combining those metaphors, the discourse aims to signify the Queen as the perennial point of reference not only for the political elite, but also for the general course of events and history for the entire nation. In the words of the speakers, the Queen has been a guiding light across many years of societal change and turmoil, surviving many parliaments and cabinets.

Another important category of metaphorical comparison is exemplarity (PERFECTION IS A VISIBLE FORM). The Queen is said to be the quintessential, perfect, and supremely representative element of Britishness. Even if social media seem to be open for critical voices which disagree on the notion that the United Kingdom is not imaginable without a monarch (Sumiala et al. 2025), the institutional discourse of Par-

liament gives no room for any doubt that the Queen is the personification of Britain for real people around the country and the entire world, joining the chorus of other leaders of the world remember her geopolitical and cultural impact (Abu-Humeid 2025).

The metaphors clearly seem to reinforce the view of the Queen as the integral element of the British society and thus magnify and justify the sense of loss which her death has inflicted on the majority of the British society. The legislators join the vast institutional discourse, vocalised in both the domestic and international media outlets (Darwish et al. 2024), as well as internationally by political leaders (Abu-Humeid 2025) mourning the death of the Queen. It is not just one of the numerous heads of state whose life was ended that fateful September day, but the quintessential person associated with Great Britain and its worldwide position.

The discourse unequivocally excludes any discussion about the purpose and future of the monarchy in Britain, as no speech concentrates on the general notion of the Queen as the supreme leader of the country. The parliamentary debates are not the time for any general discussion of the political system, but they are deeply related to the exemplification of the personal characteristics of the Queen and the judgement on the practical exercise of her political role resulting from them. The voice of the anti-monarchist reformers is totally absent from the debate. Furthermore, the metaphors of stability and quintessence of Elizabeth II at the helm of the nation further attempt to perpetuate that radical departure from the constitutional monarchy is most likely out of question among the political establishment of the nation. A potent argument for justifying this direction of the debate is the generally higher popularity of Elizabeth II and her reign, exceeding the support of the monarchy in general. The Queen had been consistently portrayed and considered the leader for all Britons, across ethnic, political, and religious divisions, and not of the specific fraction or community within it, what further strengthened her legitimacy on the throne (Bogdanor 2010, 298–309)

Considered as parts of one comprehensive picture, the three dominant metaphorical themes of stability, guidance and exemplarity in the parliamentary debates served a powerful dual purpose. They articulated a profound and widespread sense of national grief by framing the Queen as an indispensable element of British identity, while also strategically reinforcing the legitimacy and permanence of the monarchy itself. By intensely focusing on Queen Elizabeth II's personal virtues and practical conduct of her reign, the discourse circumvented any potentially divisive discussion about the future of the institution, and joined the larger narrative among the political elite, underlining the continuity and unwavering support of the monarchy. This strategic use of metaphor therefore functioned as an institutional mechanism for consolidating the monarchy's position during a period of profound transition, successfully transforming national mourning into an affirmation of the Crown's enduring significance.

5. Conclusion and further directions

This study aimed to identify patterns of discourses in the corpora containing collections of speeches given during the condolence debates in the Parliament of the United Kingdom after the death of Queen Elizabeth II. The study was conducted using corpus-based discourse analysis (CADS) (Baker 2023). The merit of this work is applying the method to a non-policy debate (see Introduction). This article examined the use of the strategy of nomination in the form of metaphors describing the Queen.

The Queen Elizabeth's role is articulated through three metaphorical discourses: stability, guidance and exemplarity. The first of these, stability, conceptualises the Queen as a permanent fixture of British society, likening her to an anchor or rock that ensures continuity and strength in the face of societal change. This metaphor suggests that the Queen embodies a unifying power that preserves social integrity amidst challenges. The second framing, 'guidance', portrays the Queen as a source of insight and direction. She is represented by symbols such as light, a lighthouse and a lodestar, which establish her as a point of reference for political leaders and the nation as a whole. Finally, the exemplarity framing positions the Queen as the ideal embodiment of Britishness.

Discussions about the future or purpose of the monarchy in Britain are avoided, with the discourse instead focusing on Queen Elizabeth II's personal characteristics and political role. The lack of anti-monarchist voices in parliamentary debates indicates a political consensus regarding the monarchy's stability and legitimacy, as well as a lack of a need to undermine it, largely due to the Queen's popularity. Metaphorical themes of stability, guidance and exemplarity portray the Queen as being central and indispensable to British identity. This transforms the feeling of national grief into a reaffirmation of the importance and continuity of the monarchy during the period of a historical transition.

There are few additional remarks regarding the limitations and possible extensions to this study. Compared to published CADS-based studies, the corpus that is the subject here is relatively small. However, it is representative, due to including the entire population of speakers participating in the debate. When moving away from plain descriptive statistics in the trial study, statistical parameters had to be chosen and described carefully to make the conclusions more transparent and comparable.

This study is limited to only a selection of potential research questions and does not address all the possible approaches to defining the underlying discourses. This leaves potential research material and other discourse undertones to discover. The differences alongside other demarcations may exist, but there is a danger they could not be properly represented due to the size of the corpus.

This study is also not diachronic. No examination of the change in the discourse over time is taken due to limitations in the material availability. However, this could be a direction of further future research – a longitudinal or comparative study on the discourse on the person of the Queen, other members of the Royal Family, or monarchy in general could be desirable and feasible in the future. It would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the discourse surrounding the Windsors has evolved.

Similar analysis can be constructed to the debates held in the Parliaments of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as the devolved parliaments of Scotland and Wales. Although the debates there were shorter than the ones that proceeded at Westminster, they included several key elements of more politically charged discourses, which were absent in British debates.

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