



# Semiotic Resources and Issue Framing: Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Theresa May's Inaugural and Resignation Speeches

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**Abstract:** Theresa May's inaugural and resignation speeches respectively mark the beginning and end of her premiership. When making her inaugural speech May was well supported by the general public, but her resignation speech was made as she stepped down from the position of Prime Minister under great political and public pressure. This paper applies multimodal discourse analysis to both her inaugural and resignation speeches, exploring how semiotic resources are used to frame issues to achieve multiple communicative effects. It is found that: (i) multiple modes, including verbal, visual, and vocal, are manipulated to frame the issue of social justice—in relation to May's commitments in the inaugural speech, and concerning achievements in the resignation speech; (ii) regarding Brexit, multiple modes are employed to express confidence and sadness in failure in the two speeches; and (iii) both speeches frame the issue of national unity, emphasizing the significance of this issue. The same issues, but with different frames, produce different effects. We further find that the verbal mode plays a dominant role in issue framing, while other modes assume different supportive functions. They are interwoven and integrated to maximize the effect of such speeches.

**Keywords:** *Theresa May, inaugural speech, resignation speech, multimodal discourse analysis, issue framing.*

## Recursos semióticos y encuadre de temas: análisis del discurso multimodal de los discursos de investidura y de dimisión de Theresa May

**Resumen:** Los discursos de investidura y de dimisión de Theresa May marcan, respectivamente, el inicio y el final de su mandato como primera ministra. Cuando pronunció su discurso de investidura, May contaba con un amplio respaldo de la opinión pública, mientras que su discurso de dimisión se produjo al abandonar el cargo de primera ministra bajo una gran presión política y social. Este artículo aplica el análisis del discurso multimodal a ambos discursos, explorando cómo se emplean los recursos semióticos para encuadrar temas y lograr múltiples efectos comunicativos. Se constata que: (i) se manipulan múltiples modos —incluidos el verbal, el visual y el vocal— para encuadrar el tema de la justicia social: en relación con los compromisos de May en el discurso de investidura y respecto de los logros en el discurso de dimisión; (ii) en lo relativo al Brexit, se utilizan diversos modos para expresar confianza y tristeza ante el fracaso en los dos discursos; y (iii) ambos discursos encuadran la cuestión de la unidad nacional, subrayando la importancia de este asunto. Los mismos temas, pero con encuadres distintos, producen efectos diferentes. Además, se observa que el modo verbal desempeña un papel dominante en el encuadre de temas, mientras que los demás modos cumplen funciones de apoyo diversas. Estos modos se entrelazan e integran para maximizar el efecto de este tipo de discursos.

**Palabras clave:** *Theresa May, discurso de investidura, discurso de dimisión, análisis del discurso multimodal, encuadre de temas.*

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## 1. Introduction

On July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016 Theresa May, the new Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, delivered her inaugural speech. In this address May expressed her determination to lead the British people to leave the European Union, and presented Britain with a more prosperous future. However, although some major achievements were made during her tenure, there were also significant problems such as terrorist attacks, financial problems, defeat in the general election, and failure in Brexit. These seemed to persist and led to a gradual loss of national support for the Prime Minister. Nearly three years later, on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019 she delivered a resignation speech, announcing that she would step down as leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party on June 7<sup>th</sup>. In this address she highlighted the achievements of her tenure, and also expressed regret for her failure during the Brexit process. These two speeches were delivered by the same speaker, and were aimed at a similar audience group with common topics of social justice, Brexit, and national unity. However, our comparative analysis of their audience reception, according to nearly 10,000 YouTube comments (as will be detailed in the Results section), shows that the two speeches achieved quite different communicative effects in the two different contexts. Viewers of the inaugural speech generally expressed a hopeful attitude towards Theresa May as the new Prime Minister, while those watching the resignation speech showed recognition for her efforts in relation to Brexit and sympathy about the circumstances of her resignation. Thus, a question arises: How were semiotic resources employed in these two speeches, in order to frame similar issues but achieve multiple communicative effects in these two different contexts?

This question is obviously linked to linguistics. To the best of our knowledge, however, the two speeches have not received much scholarly attention from linguists, although they are generally viewed as symbols of two important political issues. While a few studies (e.g., Ariesta, 2017) have analyzed the linguistic features of the inaugural speech, little linguistic attention has been given to the resignation speech, and there has been no comparative analysis of both speeches. To fill these gaps, this paper applies multimodal discourse analysis to both speeches to investigate how semiotic resources are used to frame salient issues so as to achieve different communicative effects in the two different contexts. Multimodal discourse analysis provides us with an integrated approach to examine both linguistic and extra-linguistic elements. Specifically, we try to answer the research question by analyzing verbal, visual, and vocal modes and their interface, and exploring how the integration of multiple semiotic resources facilitates communicative interaction, generates persuasive impact, and achieves different communicative effects.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Political speeches

Political speeches are used to disseminate politicians' socio-political ideologies. Speakers are often judged by their ability to phrase political information in a persuasive way, which involves numerous interactive features (Rodríguez, 2008). Therefore, the language used in

such speeches is important. Advances in natural language processing are creating a new area for the study of political speech. Laver and Benoit (2002) conducted a computerized analysis of political speech, and proposed that the use of computer coding can potentially generate huge payoffs. Many linguistic analyses have been guided by the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk, 1993; Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 2013) in investigating political speech (Bahaa, 2007; Wang, 2010; Maalej, 2012; Aydin, 2016; Talib and Fitzgerald, 2016) and its complementary perspective, positive discourse analysis (Nartey and Ernanda, 2020) from different regions and countries—for example, Britain (Blackledge, 2006), Argentina (Gialdino, 2010), and China (Kuo, 2001; Cheng and Chen, 2019). Scholars have also explored political speech from other perspectives, such as rhetoric (Salmon, 1998; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986; Augoustinos, et al., 2002; Finlayson, 2015) and persuasion (Nelson and Garst, 2005; Reyes, 2014). In addition, there are also discussions about different types of political speeches (Sitkoff, 2002; Calfano, 2009), among which inaugural and resignation speeches are highlighted for their importance.

An inaugural speech, the first formal presentation made by a new government leader, involves highly eloquent, persuasive, and ideological functions. It is “a sub-genre of political discourse often presented shortly after swearing in or taking oath of allegiance by elected people into public offices” (Biria & Mohammadi, 2012, p.1291) For speakers, inaugural speeches outline their commitment and their vision for the nation. It is a combination of literacy and orality, a kind of written language expressed orally (Kowal et al., 1997). A successful inaugural speech motivates the audience, and helps the speaker gain support and build public image.

Research on inaugural speeches involves many aspects. Some previous studies have investigated the revolution of political culture through analyses of inaugural speeches (Ericson, 1997; Lim, 2002), while some have conducted analysis in terms of genre (Sigelman, 1996; Liu, 2012) and rhetorical construction, for example, metaphor, pun, parallelism, etc. (Lu and Ahrens, 2008; WAUDAG, 1990; Biria and Mohammadi, 2012). Some scholars have focused on American presidential inaugural speeches and explored the ideologies, values, and linguistic styles of different American presidents (Hahn, 1982; Beasley, 2001). May's inaugural speech has also received attention from a few researchers; Ariesta (2017) points out that she uses three rhetorical proofs in her inaugural speech, i.e. logos, ethos, and pathos. Theresa May and David Cameron constructed different interpersonal meanings in their inaugural speeches.

A resignation speech is a public address made by a figure resigning from their current position. Usually there is competitive leadership, and therefore after the resignation a new leader will be installed. Resignations can produce significant effects on politics, the economy, and relevant social elements, which may be negative, positive, or both at the same time (Chandiok, 1996; Thomas and Laffin, 2001). In its literal presentation, a resignation speech usually reviews the resigning leader's career. Resignation is never a simple matter, and consequently politicians are cautious in constructing their speeches (Boychuk, 1994). Cheng (2016) stresses that resignation speeches have a compositional structure, which

represents a complex but generic kind of political speech. Other perspectives, such as rhetoric (Collins and Clark, 1992) and discourse strategies (Katula, 1975; Wilson, 1976), may also be applied to explore resignation speeches.

However, to the best of our knowledge there has been little scholarly attention paid to May's resignation speech, and there has been no comparison or contrast between her inaugural and resignation speeches. We believe that comparing these two speeches, from the start and end of her premiership respectively, will enrich our understanding of how similar semiotic resources may be employed to frame issues to achieve different communicative effects in different contexts. Therefore, the current study attempts to explore and compare the two speeches by highlighting the usage of verbal, visual, and vocal semiotic resources.

## 2.2 Multimodal resources and issue framing

Multimodal resources incorporate both verbal and non-verbal resources. Compared with the traditional examination of meaning expression through an analysis of verbal resources, multimodal analysis also takes into consideration the significance of non-verbal resources such as images and gestures. The underlying reason for this kind of comprehensive analysis is that in everyday communications ideas and opinions are expressed through verbal content in combination with visual and vocal behaviors such as facial expressions, head gestures, and voice quality (Mehrabian, 2017). That is to say, multimodality is the normal state of human communication (Tseronis, 2018). Extant literature has recognized the role of non-verbal cues, especially visual ones (Worth, 2016; Smith et al., 2004; Barry, 1997), and has discussed the interplay between verbal and visual modes as two of the most salient multimodal framing devices (Gross, 2009; Anthonissen, 2003). These studies have identified a series of multimodal devices that are used to create and manage communities of shared values, including both pictorial clues (choices of composition, close, medium and distant shots, frontal/rear, high/low/eye-level views, etc.) and textual ones (reported speech and lexical choices, evaluative terms, nominalizations, numerals, mass nouns, part-whole metonymies, etc.) (Belmonte and Porto, 2020). Other communicative resources include modal range, speed, timing, direction of communication, roles of discursive agents, and interrelatedness of messages (Pentzold et al., 2016). In particular, Abuczki (2011) conducted a detailed analysis of gestures used in communication processes, and noted that gestures have pragmatic, modal, performative, and parsing functions in facilitating communication.

Apart from identifying the different modes of communication, the interface between these modes is also worth delving into. As regards to the relative importance and distinct functions of these modes, the conclusions of most studies suggest that visual forms interact with verbal texts and play a complementary part in framing strategies (Pentzold et al., 2016). In other words, such studies highlight the dominance of verbal modes, whereby the verbal mode conveys the standpoint and the visual mode the arguments in support of it. However, Tseronis (2018) dismisses the verbal/visual divide in multimodal discourse

analysis and points out that visual arguments do not constitute a radically different kind of argument from verbal ones. Rather, he suggests that arguers may employ all the communication modalities that are available in a given moment. Therefore, despite the regularity and clarity that characterizes the linguistic code and the ambiguity and context dependency of the nonverbal modes, verbal and visual devices can both play direct and indirect roles in the communication process.

In political speeches, framing is a process of “defining and constructing a political issue or public controversy” (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 567). To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a text, in such a way as to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Belmonte and Porto, 2020, p. 60). Frames can impact cognition and public opinion formation. Issue framing is used to shape public opinion, and is an important way for speakers to interpret issues and disseminate social-political ideologies (Jerit, 2008). Therefore, how political elites frame issues is of vital significance. Extant theories suggest that speakers can frame issues in various ways, such as by “defining an issue as a problem, blaming a cause, suggesting solutions, and invoking a moral appeal” (Dardis, 2007, p. 247). Framing influences belief content and belief importance (Nelson and Oxley, 1999), and a well-framed issue can produce great persuasive effects.

Multimodal resources, such as verbal and visual resources, can have great significance in terms of framing effects (Nelson and Kinder, 1996). In multimodal analysis, a frame “defines the world to be engaged with; it excludes and it includes; and in doing that it shapes, presents the world according to the interest and the principles of those who frame” (Pentzold et al., 2016, p. 35). Importantly, previous issues can also be interpreted in new ways by reframing (Chong and Druckman, 2007). In fact, studies abound on the framing of social and political issues by news agencies and media through the employment of multimodal devices. Such studies have dealt with such topics as climate change (Dancygier, 2023; Guenther et al., 2022; Wessler et al., 2016), along with other related issues such as environmental justice (Moernaut et al., 2018) and plastic pollution (Hu, 2020), in which multimodal framing proves to be a powerful tool in communication and relevant analyses shed light on how these and similar issues may be framed with multimodal resources.

### 3. Methodology

In this section we introduce our choice of research method, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework employed in this study. Finally, we explain how we collected and analyzed our data, and how we assured the credibility of our results.

#### 3.1 Choice of research method

This paper employs multimodal discourse analysis as the research method. “Mode is the semiotic construction of communication technology” (Martin, 1992, p. 510). It functions in communication as the resource for constructing interaction (Martin, 1992). Multimodal

discourse analysis is concerned with the theory and analysis of semiotic resources and semantic expansions, and it extends the study of language to other resources such as images, actions, music, sound, etc. (O'Halloran, 2011).

According to Norris (2004), multimodal discourse analysis allows for the analysis of the larger parts that integrate all the possible communicative modes. In the study of multimodal discourse, inter-semiotic relations play a key role (Jewitt, 2009), and “meanings are created in texts and interactions in a complex interplay of semiosis across multiple modes” (Vijay et al., 2008, p. 129). The presentation of a speech is composed of multiple modes, which contribute to the realization of discourse semantics. Humans are remarkably capable of communicating and conveying messages about their emotions (Harrigan et al., 2004), with information transmitted via verbal, vocal, and visual channels. Nagel et al. (2012) note that audiovisual messages combine the verbal, visual, and vocal channels, each embodied by modes, and in each channel various individual messages are delivered. Therefore, multimodal discourse analysis provides a holistic approach to study the process of speech performance.

This study is underpinned by issue framing, and thus the methodological approach is intricately woven into the fabric of multimodal choices and issue framing. Previous studies on political communication (Nagel et al., 2012; Harrigan et al., 2004) have confirmed that multimodal framing can be effectively applied in the analysis of political discourses. Given that our research seeks to unravel the intricacies of political communication through a nuanced exploration of the multimodal devices employed in political discourse, the methodology of multimodal discourse analysis not only aligns with established practices in the field, but also enhances the depth of understanding that can be achieved in terms of how issue framing is manifested with multimodal resources in the two speeches.

Some social-political issues figure prominently in both of May's speeches. In the inaugural speech she mainly talks about social justice, class, laws, taxes, national unity, and Brexit, while in the resignation speech she speaks about Brexit, deficits, the national debt, job and housing security, environmental problems, social justice, and national unity. It is clear that there are three shared salient issues in both speeches, namely social justice, Brexit, and national unity. While these three issues are addressed in both speeches, if we consider the rather different contexts it is not difficult to infer that they will be framed with different multimodal resources aiming to achieve different communicative effects. Thus, comparing the multimodal framing of these three topics in the two speeches will allow us to explore how multimodal resources are employed to frame issues for different effects in different contexts.

### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

We downloaded May's inaugural and resignation speeches from the internet<sup>1</sup> and transcribed both for verbal analysis. The inaugural speech lasts for about four minutes, and the resignation speech for six minutes. We conducted a comprehensive analysis and examination of both speeches in order to provide a complete assessment of the multimodal framing in the two contrastive settings.

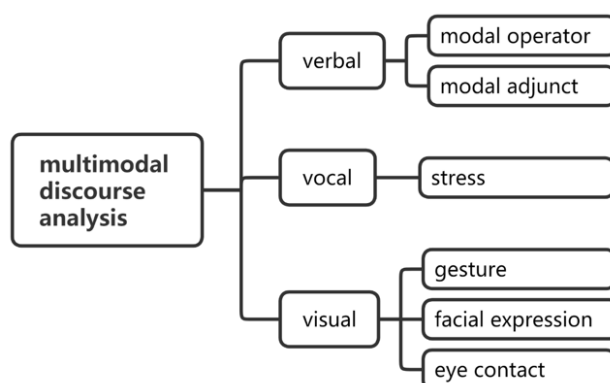


Figure 1. The framework for multimodal discourse analysis in the current study.

Many different multimodal devices may have contributed to the issue framing in the two speeches, and we acknowledge that it would be impossible to cover all of them in the current study. As shown in Figure 1, we chose to focus on particular devices for our verbal, vocal, and visual analysis. In the case of verbal communication, modality serves as a valuable indicator, providing insights into the impact or effectiveness of the communicated message. Modal operators and modal adjuncts play a crucial role in shaping the framing of issues, influencing the perceived certainty, possibility, and emotional tone associated with specific statements and thereby impacting the overall discourse interpretation (Chaiken and Eagly, 1983). With respect to vocal communication, word stress has considerable relevance in achieving the effect of communication; in fact, intonation and other nonverbal cues are key to identifying sarcastic intent in the framing of issues (Couper-Kuhlen, 2015). Finally, regarding visual communication, the three most telling signs of communication effect are gestures, facial expression, and eye contact. Analysis of gesture pragmatics involves a detailed exploration of the interaction between frames and metonymy, motivating not only the formation of gestural signs but also guiding cross-modal processes of pragmatic inferencing (Kendon, 2017). In addition, well-timed facial expressions do not simply mirror the speaker's stance or display understanding of the speaker's talk, but also perform systematic operations on the projected course of the talk (Calder and Young, 2016). Moreover, speakers often shift their gaze away from

<sup>1</sup> The inaugural and the resignation speech video was downloaded from YouTube, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDyZ8trge2E>, and at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKt-Z5Yk2Wo>.

their listeners during sarcastic utterances, demonstrated by empirical evidence from comparisons of the gaze direction of speakers in dyadic conversation when uttering sincere and sarcastic statements (Isaacowitz, 2006).

To ensure the objectivity of our data analysis we used ELAN, a tool explicitly developed to analyze multiple modes in discourse and which has been used effectively in previous studies (e.g., Bonacchi and Mela, 2014), to conduct visual and vocal analysis. For the visual modes we used ELAN to extract gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact in the two speeches, and for the vocal modes we used the tool to extract stresses. From this we were able to record the frequency of gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and stresses in the two speeches.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of our analysis, the sample presentation was independently scrutinized by two researchers. Additionally, a third researcher cross-checked the entire data analysis. These scholars, all proficient in multimodal analysis, achieved a robust agreement rate of 92.36 % during the data examination, establishing high interrater reliability and bolstering the credibility and accountability of our study. In instances where the researchers diverged in their perspectives on certain visuals, we conducted comprehensive discussions. Where dissenting views persisted we explored how distinct visual elements could be associated with diverse functions and interpretations.

To show and illustrate the communicative effects of the two speeches, we conducted a sentiment analysis on the comments on both the inaugural and resignation speeches on YouTube. Specifically, we employed WordSmith 5.0 software to generate a word frequency list and subsequently identified adjectives with a positive connotation, taking into account the semantic ratings provided in SentiWordNet 3.0.<sup>2</sup>

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Multimodal resources in May's speeches

#### 4.1.1 Verbal mode

Speakers frame issues and deliver information to audiences directly through verbal communication. This study adopts modality analysis to explore verbal modes in May's two speeches. "Modality is the grammar of explicit comment, the means by which people express their degree of commitment to the truth of propositions they utter and their views on the desirability or otherwise of the state of affairs referred to" (Fowler, 1986, p. 131). According to Halliday (2004), modality can be expressed by modal operators (such as "have to", "must", "will", "can", "would", "could", "might", "able", "willing", etc.) and modal adjuncts (such as "certainly", "probably", "possibly", "sometimes", "usually", etc.). Modality analysis aims to find out how modal operators and modal adjuncts are used to frame issues in the two speeches.

<sup>2</sup> Baccianella, S., Esuli, A., & Sebastiani, F. Sentiwordnet 3.0: an enhanced lexical resource for sentiment analysis and opinion mining[C]/Lrec. 2010, 10(2010): 2200-2204.

Table 1 summarizes the frequency of different ranks of modal operator in two speeches. In the inaugural speech, median value modal operators account for the biggest proportion, which is reflected by the word “will”. “Will” is used for talking about the future or showing commitment, indicating the speaker’s prospect. In the resignation speech, “can” ranks first among the modal operators, mainly used for describing May’s ability. These two different but high-occurrence modal operators demonstrate the different emphasis in each speech. Table 2 recapitulates the frequency of different ranks of modal adjuncts in the two speeches. In the resignation speech various modal adjuncts are employed, while in the inaugural speech the use of modal adjuncts is comparatively lower.

Table 1. The frequency of different ranks of modal operator in the two speeches.

Modality ranks	Modal operator	Inaugural speech			Modal operator	Resignation speech		
		Occurrence	Total	%		Occurrence	Total	%
High value	0	0	0	0	have to, must	1	2	10 %
Median value	will	16	16	80 %	should will	1 5	6	32 %
Low value	can	4	4	20 %	can maybe able	8 1 2	11	58 %
Total			20	100 %			19	100 %

Table 2. The frequency of different ranks of modal adjuncts in the two speeches.

Modality ranks	Modal adjunct	Inaugural speech			Modal adjunct	Resignation speech		
		Occurrence	Total	%		Occurrence	Total	%
High value	always much just	1	3	60 %	certain, clear, fully, always, all, almost, only, ever, certainly, still never, just so much	1 2 3	17	94 %
Median value	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Low value	less likely	2	2	40 %	seemed	1	1	6 %
Total			5	100 %			18	100 %

#### 4.1.2 Visual mode

Schill (2012) states that visual symbols are central components in political speeches, especially since television has become the major source of political information. The visibility of news has more than aesthetic effects; it also influences the substance and quality of political information (Benner and Rothe, 2023). Visual modes involve extensive components, such as gesture, facial expression, eye contact, movement, color, etc. May presents different visibility in delivering the two speeches. Table 2 gauges the frequency

and duration of gesture, facial expression, and eye contact in the two speeches. In terms of gestures, in the inaugural speech May opens her arms wide seven times, while in the resignation speech she does this only twice. Opening the arms wide in a speech allows the speaker to involve and connect with the audience, and contributes to the construction of interpersonal meanings and relationships (Hadar, 1991). Thus, it may be inferred that this gesture was used more frequently in the inaugural speech in order to establish connections and maintain her relationship with the audience.

In terms of her facial expression, in both speeches May is serious for most of the time, which is normal in political speeches (Stewart et al., 2009). However, there are some important differences. For instance, in the inaugural speech she smiles five times, especially at the end of the speech, and she keeps smiling for a long time, suggesting a kind and friendly image. In contrast, in the resignation speech she breaks down in tears at the end, revealing her sadness and negative emotions.

Regarding eye contact, as Table 3 suggests, in the four-minute inaugural speech May spends around three minutes making eye contact with the audience, among which the average duration of eye contact is about 2.5 seconds and the longest lasts for about 30 seconds. In the six-minute resignation speech the eye contact time is also about 3 minutes, but both the average duration and the longest duration are shorter, about 1 second and 4 seconds respectively. In speeches, eye contact allows the speaker to interact with the audience and construct interpersonal meanings, which contributes to effective communication (Jongerius et al., 2020). Our results indicate that in her inaugural speech May maintains regular and stable eye contact with the audience, which may help her to establish instant interpersonal relationships between herself and her audience and thus promote communication (Senju & Johnson, 2009). However, in her resignation speech eye contact is less stable, although she does not avoid it altogether, and she spends more time looking at her script.

**Table 3.** The frequency and duration of gesture, facial expression, and eye contact in the two speeches.

Tier	Inaugural speech			Resignation speech		
	Gesture	Facial expression	Eye contact	Gesture	Facial expression	Eye contact
Occurrence	7	5	70	2	1	158
Minimal duration	0.79s	1.55s	0.183s	0.39s	2.21s	0.16s
Maximal duration	2.89s	5.48s	30.192s	1.32s	2.21s	3.77s
Average duration	1.607143s	2.82s	2.485186s	0.855s	2.21s	0.94s
Total	11.25s	14.1s	173.963s	1.71s	2.21s	167.56s

#### 4.1.3 Vocal mode

Vocal mode comprises elements such as intonation, pitch, speech rate, etc. Intonation is used for expressing a particular feeling, pitch reflects whether a voice is high or low, speech rate calculates speed, and intensity describes a speaker's volume. As communicative actions, acoustic sources carry a lot of information (Feld, 1984).

The style of May's public speech is consistently forceful; the pitch, speech rate, and intensity in both the inaugural and resignation speeches vary only a little. However, intonation foregrounds key information. In particular, stresses are often used to highlight elements in a speech, such as important information, emotions, and values (Cutler and Jesse, 2021; Bänziger and Scherer, 2005), and stressed intonation can attract the audience's attention and thus promote their understanding of the stressed elements (Filippi, 2020; Fónagy and Bérard, 2006). Therefore, in the analysis of vocal modes we focus on May's use of stress in her speeches.

Table 4 shows calculations of the frequency and duration of stressed elements in the two speeches. As shown in Table 4, May uses stress for emphasis 68 times in total and for about 40 seconds in the inaugural speech, compared with 51 times and for about 30 seconds in the resignation speech. This reflects that different information values and emotions are employed in the two speeches. Extracts 1 and 2 are examples from the inaugural speech and the resignation speech respectively, with stressed tones marked with the sign "'". Extract 1 is delivered right after May describes the life struggles of ordinary working-class families, such as job security, mortgage, the cost of living, and children's education, and in this extract three words are stressed: "just" is stressed to highlight the toughness and struggles of life; and "want" and "directly" are stressed to indicate the speaker's invitation to communicate with the audience, in particular those from an "ordinary working-class family". In this special context the stressed words jointly contribute to the construction of interpersonal meanings and relationships between May and her target audience, bringing the new Prime Minister closer to her audience. In Extract 2 "security", "freedom", and "opportunity" are stressed and highlighted as key values in May's political career, and the word "throughout" is stressed to emphasize that she has adhered to those values for her entire term of office. When she frames issues using stress in this way, the stressed intonation attracts the audience's attention (McGregor, 1982) and thereby promotes their understanding and recognition of the highlighted information and values.

- Extract 1

If you are one of those families, if you are *'just* managing, I *'want* to address you *'directly*.

- Extract 2

*'Security*, *'freedom*, and *'opportunity*. Those values have guided me *'throughout* my career.

**Table 4.** The frequency and duration of stress in two speeches.

	Occurrence	Minimal duration	Maximal duration	Average duration	Total
Inaugural speech	68	0.16s	1.39s	0.587088s	39.922s
Resignation speech	51	0.21s	1.09s	0.62549s	31.9s

## 4.2 Semiotic resources and issue framing

The semiotic resources analyzed above are used to frame different issues in the communicative process of the two speeches. Among all the issues we have touched on so far, this section highlights the three issues covered by both speeches, namely social justice, Brexit, and national unity. Detailed analysis will illuminate, first, how multiple modes contribute to framing salient issues, and second, how the integration of multiple modes contributes to multiple communicative effects.

### 4.2.1 Frames of social justice

Social justice has frequently appeared in British governmental reports in recent years, becoming one of the government's major decision-making orientations. As the government leader, in both the inaugural and resignation speeches May gives high priority to the illustration of social justice. In the inaugural speech she enumerates some significant socially unjust phenomena, involving race, gender, education, class, job and housing security:

- Extract 3

That means *'fighting against* the burning injustice that, if you are born poor, you *will* die on average 9 years earlier than others. If you are black, you are treated *'more* harshly by the criminal justice system than if you are white. If you are a white, working-class boy, you are *'less likely* than anybody else in Britain to go to university. If you are at a state school, you are *less likely* to reach the top professions than if you are educated privately. If you are a woman, you *will* earn less than a man. If you suffer from mental health problems, there is not enough help to hand. If you are young, you *will* find it *'harder* than ever before to own your home.

When she speaks of “fighting against the burning injustice” in Extract 3, May stresses this clause, and at the same time she opens her arms forcefully for additional emphasis, which demonstrates her great commitment to this battle. May uses seven parallelisms to describe the injustices. The recurrence of “if you are...” produces a sense of identification. She directly addresses the audience with her use of “you”, and discusses situations that are real for them. The repeated use of the modal operator “will” and the modal adjunct “less likely” allows May to describe different scenarios related to the lives of British people, as well as the consequences of social injustice, highlighting the social meaning of “fighting against the burning injustice”. In addition, she stresses all the comparative forms, including “more”, “less likely”, “harder”, and “much harder”, expressing her empathy for people from ordinary working-class families. Throughout this whole process May makes constant and lengthy eye contact with the audience, especially when she says “you”, intensifying the identification in her words. All of those elaborations foreshadow her commitments later on.

- Extract 4

I know you are working around the clock, I know you are doing your best, and I *'know* that sometimes life *can* be a struggle. The government I lead *will* be driven *'not* by the interests of the privileged, but by *'yours*. We *will* do everything we

'can to give you more control over your lives. When we take the big calls, we *will* think 'not of the powerful, but 'you. When we pass new laws, we *will* listen 'not to the mighty but to 'you. When it comes to taxes, we *will* prioritize not the wealthy, but 'you. When it comes to opportunity, we *will* not entrench the advantages of the fortunate few. We *will* do everything we *can* to help 'anybody, whatever your background, to go 'as far as your talents *will* take you.

After describing unjust phenomena, May makes a number of commitments which are accentuated by the choice of the modal operator “will”. As Table 1 suggests, she uses the modal operator “will” sixteen times in her inaugural speech. Through this word, May outlines the vision of the Conservative and Unionist Party directly. In Extract 4, by repeatedly using “we will...” May is telling the British people that she will strive to build a more fair and harmonious society. She makes those actions specific rather than just quoting slogans, which conveys a connotation of pragmatism. When she is delivering these commitments, May stresses the words “not”, “you”, and “anybody”. The word “not” appears four times and “you” three times, highlighting the key information. “Not” is used to emphasize her determination to oppose the non-negotiable issue of social injustice. “You” invokes a strong sense of motivation and inspiration.

Apart from her use of language, May also gesticulates to connect with the audience four times. Some gestures and instances of eye contact are used to construct interpersonal meanings (Singer et al., 2008) and promote her communication with the audience. For instance, she opens her arms to engage the audience and tries to involve and connect with them. Also, as shown in Figure 2, she makes eye contact with the audience which lasts for about 30 seconds, allowing her to establish an instant relationship with her audience (Kaiser et al., 2022) and communicate with them directly. These frames contribute to the perceived practicality and effectiveness of the measures she puts forward, facilitating the reliability of her commitments.

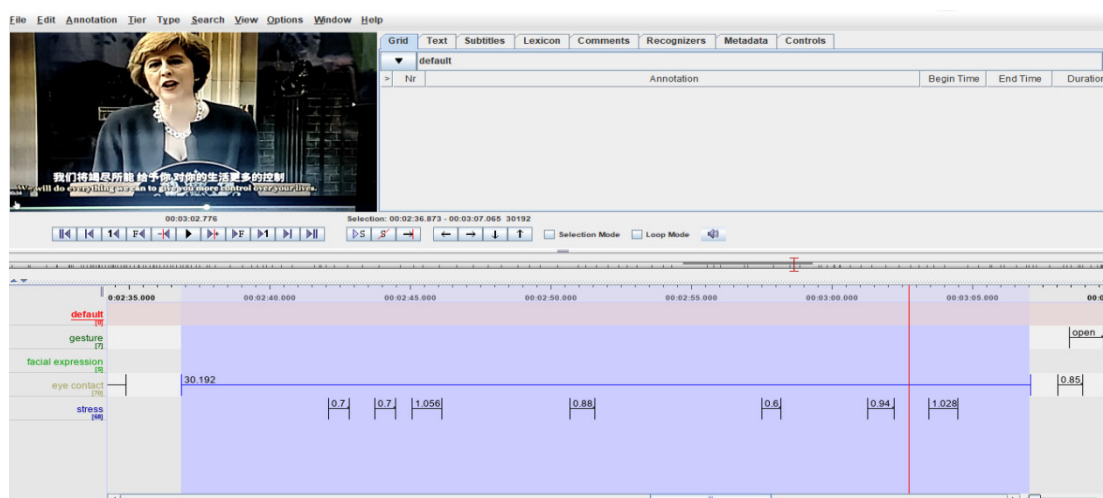


Figure 2. The 30-second eye contact in Theresa May's inaugural speech.

In her resignation speech, the frames of social justice mainly concern May's achievements during her tenure, which serve as the argumentation for her promises. The speech emphasizes the accomplishments the government has achieved.

- Extract 5

My focus has been on ensuring that the good jobs of the future *will* be created in communities across the '*whole* country, '*not* just in London and the South East, through our Modern Industrial Strategy. We have helped more people than ever enjoy the security of a job. We are building more '*homes* and helping first-time buyers onto the housing ladder – so young people *can* enjoy the opportunities their parents did... That is what a '*decent*, '*moderate* and '*patriotic* '*Conservative* government, on the common ground of British politics, '*can* achieve – '*even* as we tackle the biggest peacetime challenge any government has faced.

Social justice contains many aspects, and May mentions job and housing security first, since these are her biggest concerns. Although she was only Prime Minister for three years, she is emphasizing that she has made great contributions to Britain. As Extract 5 shows, the emphasis is that more jobs have been created and more homes have been built, facilitating social justice and people's livelihoods. The stressed words "whole" and "not" are in contrast, reflecting the progress made in job creation. In terms of housing, the modal operator "can" demonstrates the validity of May's efforts. Extract 5 also suggests May's depiction of the government she has led, achieved by the stressed words "decent", "moderate", and "patriotic". The modal operator "can", combined with the stressed word "even", indicates the government's capability, further enhancing the positive impression of May's Conservative government.

- Extract 6

But the '*unique* privilege of this office is to use this platform to give a voice to the voiceless, to fight the burning injustices that still scar our society. *That is why* I put proper funding for mental health at the heart of our NHS long-term plan. *It is why* I am ending the postcode lottery for survivors of domestic abuse. *It is why* the Race Disparity Audit and gender pay reporting are shining a light on inequality, so it has '*nowhere* to hide. *And that is why* I set up the independent public inquiry into the tragedy at Grenfell Tower – to search for the truth, so '*nothing* like it can ever happen again, and so the people who lost their lives that night are '*never* forgotten.

In Extract 6 she lists a number of achievements in other aspects of social justice, including health care, domestic abuse, race, gender, and health and safety. The modal adjuncts "ever" and "never" are powerful illustrations of May's declaration to fight against social injustice. Here she stresses three words, "nowhere", "nothing", and "never", using a slow and sorrowful tone which may arouse emotion in the audience in relation to these issues.

In illustrating her government's efforts, May uses four sentences beginning "That is why...", "It is why...", "It is why...", and "And that is why...". With this cumulative progression the rationality of the listed moves is underlined, producing a persuasive effect. May demonstrates her commitment to fight against social injustice in her inaugural speech, and in her resignation speech she enumerates the achievements she has made on this issue as a way to build a reliable public image.

#### 4.2.2 Frames related to Brexit

Brexit has been a salient issue in Britain since the referendum in 2016. In the inaugural speech, May shows her determination to leave the European Union. Thus, May's inaugural speech mainly expresses her confidence on this issue:

- Extract 7

We are living through an important moment in our country's history. Following the referendum, we face a time of *'great 'national 'change*. And I know, because we are Great Britain, that we *'will 'rise to the challenge*. As we leave the European Union we *will* forge a *'bold new positive* role for ourselves in the world, and we *will* make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few, but for *'every one of us*. *'That will* be the mission of the government I *'lead*, and *'together we 'will* build a *'better Britain*.

In Extract 7, the stressed phrase "great national change" is referring to Brexit. The recurrence of the modal operator "will" depicts May's national vision, showing her confidence on this issue. Her face lights up with pleasure at the end of this speech, directly conveying her positive emotion in that moment. At the same time she makes eye contact with the audience, which allows her to share her pleasure with them. May's confidence comes from the British people; by the description "And I know, because we are Great Britain, that we will rise to the challenge", May projects a national image of strong-willed, persistent, and brave British people to the world. By their collective efforts, the British people will overcome the difficulties and enjoy the victory of Brexit. Here, May opens her arms three times in communication with the audience, generating motivational effects.

Her confidence also stems from her new government as well. As the leader of the new government, she has great confidence in the party she leads. This is accentuated by the repetition of the modal operator "will" and stress on the phrase "bold new positive". Under the new government, supported by thousands of hard-working British people, May firmly believes that after Brexit the country "will forge a bold, new positive role for ourselves in the world". The final two stressed words, "better Britain", reiterate her confidence again.

As the biggest social upheaval, Brexit was the most prominent issue during her tenure. In her inaugural speech May demonstrates her conviction to take Britain out of the European Union. However, she failed to achieve this, and in her resignation speech she admits her failure in this regard. Importantly, however, frames are used to reduce the negative influence of this failure.

- Extract 8

Back in 2016, we gave the British people a choice. Against all predictions, the British people voted to leave the European Union. I feel as *'certain* today as I did three years ago that in a *'democracy*, if you give people a choice, you have a *'duty* to implement what they decide. I have *done my 'best* to do that. I negotiated the terms of our exit and a new relationship with our closest neighbors that protects jobs, our security, and our Union. *I have done everything I can* to convince MPs to back that deal. *'Sadly*, I have not been able to do so. I *'tried 'three 'times.*

When May uses the stressed modal adjunct “certain” she looks at the audience with a resolute facial expression, which strengthens her affirmation at that moment. The modal operator “can” illustrates May’s endeavors in relation to Brexit, echoing the statement “I have tried three times”. In this sentence she stresses almost all the words (Figure 3), especially the word “three”, emphasizing her persistence; however, she was still “not ... able to do so”. The stressed word “sadly” is used to convey a sense of regret for having “not been able to do so”, emphasizing the emotional tone of the statement. Also, a falling tone is used to enhance the expression of regret and helplessness.

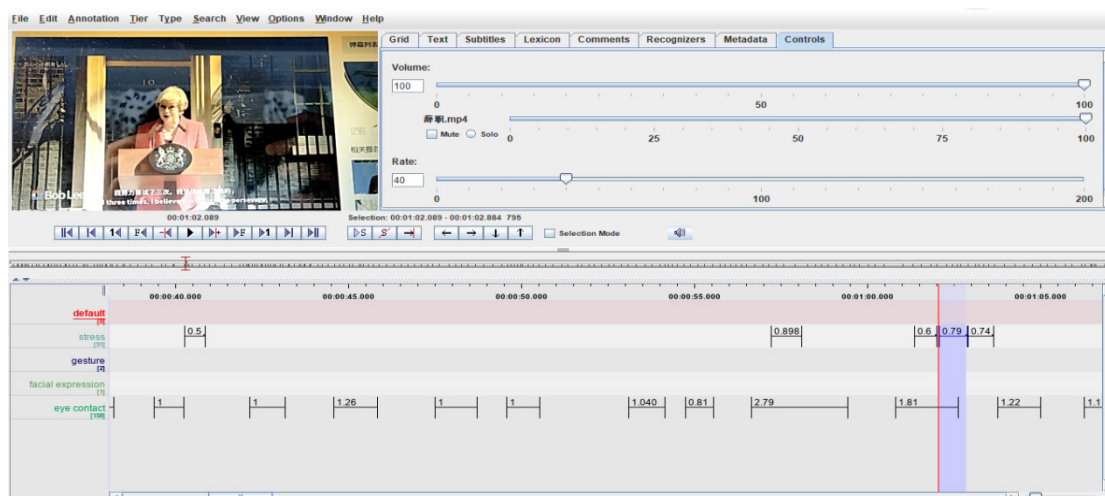


Figure 3. Stress in Theresa May's resignation speech.

- Extract 9

It is, and *will 'always* remain, a matter of *'deep regret* to me that I have *not been able* to deliver Brexit.

After expressing her sadness, May employs some strategies to repair her image after the failure of Brexit. First, she adopts euphemistic words, achieved by using the low-value modal operator “not able to” twice. As Extract 9 shows, when speaking of Brexit May does

not use words like failure, lose, defeated, or modal auxiliaries like cannot, could not, etc. Such words would directly point to the incapability of the speaker. Instead, she selects the low-value modal operator “not able to”, toning down the negative effect of this failure.

- Extract 10

Such a consensus *can* ‘only be reached if those on ‘all sides of the debate are willing to ‘compromise. For many years the great humanitarian Sir Nicholas Winton – who saved the lives of hundreds of children by arranging their evacuation from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia through the Kindertransport – was my constituent in Maidenhead... He said, “Never forget that compromise is not a dirty word. *Life depends on ‘compromise.*’ He was right.

Second, she mentions other parties who share responsibility for the failure to achieve Brexit. In Extract 10 May says that she has done everything she can to deliver Brexit, which means that she has tried her best, but she still failed. This sentence implies that this failure was out of her control, with other objective factors, “those on all sides”, also contributing to it. The modal operator “willing” also indicates this shared responsibility. Moreover, the stressed words “only” and “all” demonstrate that Brexit can only be realized when all sides are willing to compromise, which implies that she feels she should not bear all the blame. Meanwhile, the repeated use of and emphasis on the word “compromise” underscores its significance within the context of the discourse.

- Extract 11

It *will* be for my ‘successor to seek a way forward that honors the result of the referendum. To succeed, he or she *will have to* find consensus in Parliament where I have not.

- Extract 12

I know that the Conservative Party *can* renew itself in the years ahead, that we ‘*can* deliver Brexit and ‘*serve* the British people with policies inspired by our values. ‘*Security, freedom, and ‘opportunity.* Those values have guided me ‘*throughout* my career.

Last but not least, the speech reveals May’s attempts to make compensation. Although she did not deliver Brexit, the British government still hopes to leave the European Union. In this address, May admits her failure, gives explanations, and also points out the future solution of this issue, namely the efforts of her successor and the Conservative Party. In Extract 11, she makes this request of her successor, represented by the high-value modal operator “will have to”, which implies a significant obligation. Her expectation for the Conservative Party is presented by the modal verbal “can” in Extract 12. The repetition of “can” also shows her optimism about Brexit in the long term. Although she has resigned, May passes the responsibility for Brexit to her successor and

the Party, which suggests compensation for the public. All of those strategies help to minimize the passive impression of failure in Brexit, and represent attempts to repair her public image.

#### 4.2.3 Frames related to national unity

Before May became the Prime Minister, the British people were divided when it came to Brexit. There was significant controversy related to the Brexit negotiations, the referendum and opposition to the government's plans to leave the EU, which were detrimental to national unity and the union between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Thus, in both speeches, frames related to national unity place great emphasis on the importance of the union.

- Extract 13

David Cameron has led a *'one-nation government*, and it is in *'that spirit that I also 'plan to lead. Because not everybody knows this, but the *'full title of my 'party is the *'Conservative and 'Unionist Party*, and that word *"unionist"* is very *'important to me. It means we believe in the *'Union: the 'precious, 'precious bond between 'England, 'Scotland, 'Wales, and 'Northern Ireland. But it means something else that is just as important; it means we believe in a *union 'not just between the nations of the United Kingdom, but between 'all of our citizens, 'every 'one of us, whoever we are and 'wherever we are from.*****

National unity has been a historically problematic issue for Britain, particularly after the Brexit vote when different opinions aggravated social tension. As the new government leader, it was urgent for May to address this problem. As shown in Extract 13, in her inaugural speech May mentions the word "unionist" and "union" four times in total. Repetition is a common rhetorical device used to underscore key concepts and ideas, making them more memorable and emotionally resonant. In this example, the concept of "union" is central to the message May is conveying, and the repeated use of these terms emphasizes their importance.

May approaches the issue of national unity via David Cameron's legacy, and the stressed word "one-nation" expresses her vision directly. For May, the word "union" has two connotations, for nations and for every citizen. The repetition of "precious" and the stresses on "England", "Scotland", "Wales", and "Northern Ireland" underline the importance of the unity between nations. The stressed words "not", "all", and "every" foreground the importance of unity between citizens. When framing this issue, May slows down her speed, making every key word prominent. May smiles slightly when she says "that word 'unionist' is very important to me" (Figure 4), and combines this with a long eye contact, a move of resonating with the audience and achieving interaction.

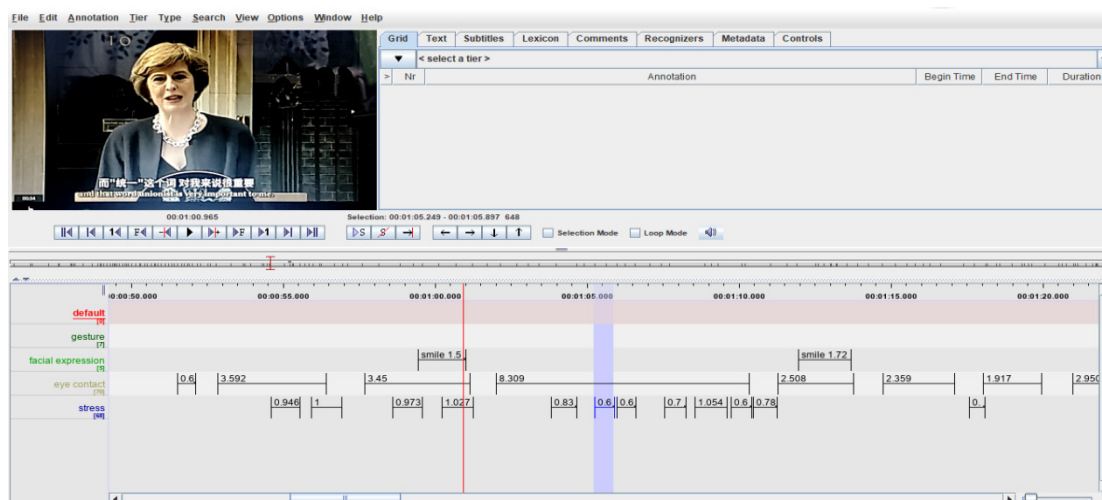


Figure 4. Theresa May smiling at the audience in the inaugural speech.

- Extract 14

Because this country is a *union*. *Not* just a family of four nations. But a *union* of *people* – all of us. Whatever our background, the color of our skin, or who we love. We stand together. And *together* we have a *great future*. Our politics may be under strain, but there is *so much* that is good about this country, *so much* to be proud of, *so much* to be optimistic about... I do so with *no ill-will*, but with *enormous* and *enduring* gratitude to have had the opportunity to *serve the country I love*.

In the resignation speech, special attention is also given to national unity at the end. In Extract 14 May mentions the word “union” twice. For her, the word “union” always has two connotations, manifested by the stressed words “not” and “people”. Different from the

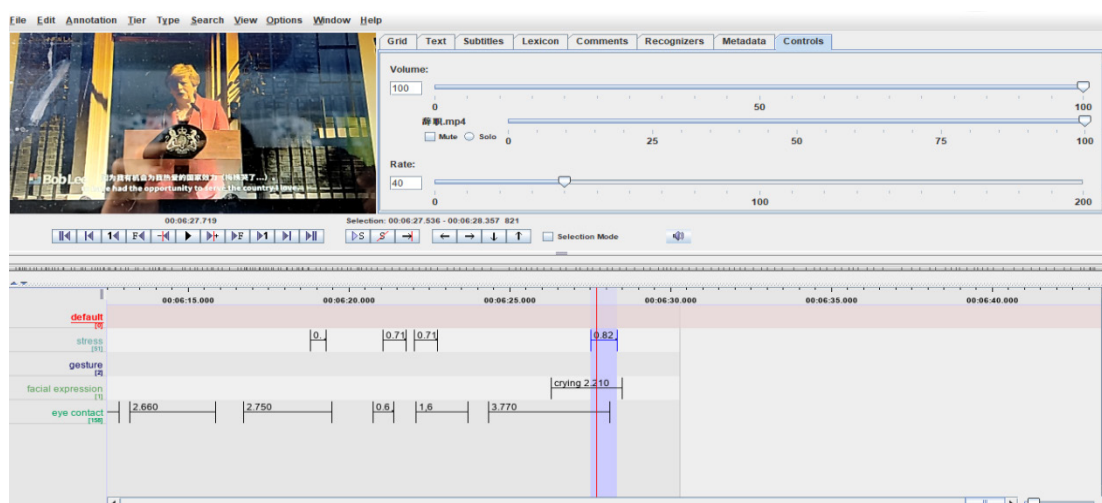


Figure 5. Theresa May breaking down into tears in the resignation speech.

frames in the inaugural speech, in this speech, as well as depicting the precious bond, May also frames a future vision and expresses her feelings. The stressed words “together” and “great” illustrate her outlook. Three years after the inauguration speech progress has been made on this issue, but other problems have appeared, reflected by the statement that “our politics may be under strain”. However, the nation still has great prospects, which is accentuated through the repetition of “so much”. The stressed words “enormous” and “enduring” also reveal her feelings, highlighting May’s gratitude and sincere regard for the country. She breaks down in tears when saying “to serve the country I love” (Figure 5), an emotional expansion at the end of the speech.

### 4.3 Audience reception

To examine the communicative effects of multimodal framing as well as the use of multimodal resources in the two speeches, we further conducted an audience reception analysis by collecting and analyzing the comments on both speeches left by viewers on YouTube.

The comments on May’s inaugural speech garnered a substantial response, with 1,445 comments containing a total of 11,572 words. These comments span a seven-year period from 2016 to 2023, a long time after her resignation in May 2019. The word frequency list (see Table 5) derived from these online comments revealed that the top five most frequently used adjectives were “good”, “great”, “social”, “same”, and “better”. A closer look at the collocations for these five adjectives shows that the viewers generally hold a positive attitude to Theresa May as the new Prime Minister as framed in her inaugural speech. It is worth mentioning that the phrase “social justice” occurs frequently, indicating a significant topic of this speech. Overall, the data suggests that May’s inaugural speech received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the audience and viewers, clearly achieving its communicative effects.

The comments on her resignation speech were even more extensive, totaling 7,639 comments and 28,172 words. These comments were posted by viewers between 2019 and 2023. Employing the same analytical method, we found that the five most commonly used adjectives in these comments were “best”, “good”, “bad”, “better”, and “great”. After a detailed analysis of the collocations for each adjective, we found that the positive words “good”, “better”, and “best” are usually used in the comments to convey recognition of May’s efforts as Prime Minister, while the negative words “bad” and “sorry” are generally used to express the viewers’ sympathetic attitude towards her stepping down.

It must be noted that although the words “better” and “good” appear in comments for both speeches, their usages are different in the two contexts. While “better” is used to express hope for the future in a general sense in the comments related to the inaugural speech, it is used in a stronger comparative sense in the comments on the resignation speech, to suggest that given the situation, no one could have done better than May. Moreover, the word “good” is still used, indicating that the viewers did not have negative

opinions of May because of her resignation. In contrast, the word “bad” is used to describe the difficult situation of her resignation more often than her failure to deliver Brexit as planned.

Thus, we can safely say that the overall tone of these netizen comments conveys a sense of acknowledgment of May's efforts as Prime Minister, although there was also criticism within the comments. Additionally, words expressing viewers' sympathy for the end of May's term as Prime Minister featured prominently in these comments. Hence, it is evident that the resignation speech successfully elicited the intended emotional response from the public, signifying the effectiveness of the communicative modes employed in this process.

**Table 5.** The frequency of adjectives in the two speeches.

Ranking	Inaugural Speech	Freq. (‰)	Resignation Speech	Freq. (‰)
1	good	3.3	best	3.6
2	great	2.3	good	2.7
3	social	1.7	bad	1.7
4	same	1.5	better	1.5
5	better	1.0	sorry	1.1

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, a detailed analysis was conducted to demonstrate how Theresa May manipulates multiple modes simultaneously to frame issues and achieve communicative effects. We find that social justice, Brexit, and national unity are prominent issues in both speeches. In terms of social justice, May highlights her commitment to fight against social injustice in her inaugural speech, and the achievements made during her tenure in the resignation speech. Regarding Brexit, she expresses her confidence in Brexit in the first speech, and employs strategies that can minimize the passive impression of failure in the second one. Finally, in terms of national unity, in both speeches May lays great emphasis on its importance. The use of multiple modes frames the issues in a more persuasive way.

The study contributes to the understanding of verbal semiotics by highlighting the dominant role of verbal modes in issue framing in political discourse. Some theories from neuroscience and linguistics, such as Paivio's Dual Coding Theory which explains why visuals are better recognized, have supported the primacy of visual information (Nagel et al., 2012; Schill, 2012). This study demonstrates that strategic use of language plays a primary role in framing. Language functions in two aspects: making sense of human experience, and acting out social relationships (Halliday, 2004). In both speeches, May uses many modal operators and modal adjuncts to construct frames, conveying her ideologies more precisely. Moreover, she applies different strategies while framing the issue of Brexit,

minimizing the negative impact of her failure in this regard. The strategic use of language is conducive to a well-framed issue, which helps the audience to make sense of this issue and disseminates the speaker's ideologies.

This study has found that paralinguistic elements assume different functions in issue framing. To be specific, visual semiotic resources are important in impression formation, while vocal semiotic resources present the current emotion and attitude of the speaker. The advantages of visuals appear to be important in attracting and holding audiences, because the brain can process multiple visual images simultaneously and make judgments accordingly. Thus, when framing issues speakers usually utilize diverse visual materials to interact with the audience, which help to build a good impression and achieve the effects of persuasion. In both of May's speeches, the analysis shows that gesture, facial expression, and eye contact all function well in creating interaction with the audience. As for vocal resources, linguists have suggested that acoustic stress is often used for pragmatic implication, which allows the audience to select the intentional interpretation of the speaker (Cosmides, 1983). We suggest that vocals also have a great effect on emotional expression. May employs many stressed intonations to express her affective state—affirmation, confidence, sadness, helplessness, etc.—which enable the audience to easily and directly sense her emotions. These multiple semiotic resources, with different functions, significantly expand speech effects.

This study has demonstrated that the same issue produces different effects with the application of different frames, which extends the opinion that previous issues can be reinterpreted into new ones through reframing (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Social justice, Brexit, and national unity are three common issues in both of May's speeches. However, because of the use of different frames, the emphasis varies, with commitments versus achievements in the issue of social justice, confidence versus sadness in the issue of Brexit, and future vision and personal feelings added to the issue of national unity, thus shifting the value dimension. Frames are interpretative structures and different perspectives cause different interpretations, generating distinct effects.

In future research, several relevant areas could be further explored. For example, future work could analyze and examine the practical effects of different frames on the audience, i.e., how people react when they are exposed to different frames. Moreover, the focal speeches (as well as other important political speeches) could be further examined and analyzed from other linguistic and multimodal perspectives. For instance, the mood, tenor, and acts in the two speeches could be analyzed and compared. Also, given the relevance and importance of rhetorical analysis, political speeches should be studied using this approach. Political communication is bi-directional, and such interactions can significantly influence the receivers' political conception and awareness. Additional research in this area will improve our understanding of the effects as well as the nature of issue framing in political communication and other contexts alike.

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Conceptualization / *Conceptualización*: Huiyu Zhang and Yuanhong Wei.

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Methodology / *Metodología*: Huiyu Zhang and Yuanhong Wei.

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