

1 Analysing the Evolving Press Discourse of Contemporary UK Inequality

This study explores the discursive representation of wealth inequality in Britain in two centre-right newspapers – *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* – and possible changes in that representation over the past forty-five years (1971–2016). I seek to address two main questions: are British newspapers writing about wealth inequality differently in recent years than they did in the 1970s, and might those differences have helped present-day inequality seem reasonable and unavoidable? The study uses corpus linguistic and critical discourse analytic methods to help identify significant and changing lexis, multi-word phrases and clausal patterns that contribute to the implicit representation of wealth inequality in the early 1970s and the subsequent decades, attending to shifts in those representations. The project can be classified as corpus-assisted discourse studies (Partington et al. 2013), but there is a diachronic dimension and a critical motivation to the project also, which situate it in the critical discourse tradition of work by Fowler (1991), van Dijk (e.g., van Dijk 1991, 2008a) and many others.

1.1 Increased Wealth Inequality in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has become one of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with the highest levels of wealth inequality, and in recent decades this inequality has increased rather than declined: these facts are universally recognised. While wealth and income inequality gradually reduced throughout most of the twentieth century, from the late 1970s onwards this progressive trend reversed. That this entrenched and possibly still-growing inequality is a cause for concern is also widely acknowledged and discussed in academic and political circles.

Commentators, economists, historians and think tanks of all political persuasions acknowledge the problem of growing (not shrinking) inequality. Writing in 2012, even Ferdinand Mount, who once ran Prime Minister Thatcher's Policy Unit and was head of the right-wing Centre for Policy Studies in the 1980s, noted that 'over the past 30 years the share of national income going to the bottom half of earners in Britain has fallen steeply. Real wages nearly

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doubled overall during those 30 years, but only 8% of that growth went to the bottom earners' (Mount 2012: 5, 7). Also reporting in 2012, Cribb et al. noted:

Up to 1977, income inequality had been on a long-term downward trend, a trend which, as it happens, turned around towards the end of the 1970s. The 1980s saw a historically unprecedented increase in inequality – an increase which has not been unwound since, despite the very substantial growth in the benefit and tax credit budget in the 2000s . . . The income share of the richest 1% has nearly trebled. Even after tax, the richest 1% of households took home nearly 9% of all income in 2009–10 compared with 3% in 1977. (p. 3)

The broad trends were summarized again by Zucman (2015):

Inequality in pre- and post-tax income has risen remarkably in the UK since the late 1970s. Inequality growth was strongest in the 1980s, but has continued steadily for those in the top half of the income distribution (especially the top 1%). Inequality of net income fell in the crisis as the welfare system 'did its job'. But there are signs that it is rising once again and the tax and benefit changes since 2010 have been largely regressive. Perhaps the main cleavage is between pensioners who have done relatively well compared with those of working age, especially the young and households with children.

The best-known way of measuring inequality (there are many) is the Gini coefficient, which aggregates the gaps between people's incomes into a single measure. If everyone in a group has the same income, the Gini coefficient is 0; if all income goes to one person in the group, it is 1. The Gini coefficient shows that the United Kingdom is one of the OECD countries with greater wealth inequality – and that it has grown more like the United States and less like the rest of Western Europe in this respect over the last forty years. According to the Equality Trust:

Most OECD countries have a coefficient lower than 0.32 with the lowest being 0.24. The UK, a fairly unequal society, scores 0.34 and the US, an even more unequal society, 0.38. In contrast, Denmark, a much more equal society, scores 0.25. [www.equalitytrust.org.uk/how-economic-inequality-defined]

The inequality is apparent when income alone is measured, but when personal wealth of all kinds is calculated, the United Kingdom is even more unequal. The richest 10% of households hold 45% of all wealth. The poorest 50%, by contrast, own just 8.7%. We can also measure relative (not absolute) poverty, nowadays commonly defined (e.g., throughout the European Union) as having a household income, adjusted for family size, that is less than 60% of the median income. The number of people in the United Kingdom living in relative poverty by this useful measure increased disturbingly in the 1980s, from 5% to 12%, and has moved only slightly since. By 2020 it is estimated that five million children in the United Kingdom (the per capita sixth richest nation in the world) will be growing up in relative poverty.

Another important measure is the ‘wage share’ of GDP: the proportion of GDP (gross domestic product: total national earnings) that returns to workers as wages. As a Trades Union Congress (TUC) position paper shows, between 1975 and 2008 the wage share fell from 63% to 53.5% (between 1948 and 1973 it rose, broadly, from 57% to 59%, surged to 64% in 1975, dropped rapidly to 52% in 1996, and has risen only slightly since). Think of this as a small business with profits (after non-salary costs) of £100,000: a few decades back, £64k of this would have gone to those who did the work, rather than the non-working investing owners. Now the workers get £53.5k: considerably less, while the owners get considerably more. When it is remembered that wages for top earners have risen disproportionately, the impact on the average-income worker is clearly worse: their wages have not kept pace with the GDP income that they have helped generate (if they had, actual UK average earnings in 2010 would have been £33k, and not £26k).

Although disparities of *income* (earned or unearned) may be easier to document, the background to my study is not merely income but all sources of *wealth*, all assets, since this gives a fuller picture of the financial basis of inequality of opportunity. Wealth is much more unequally distributed than income, with the top 10% owning 100 times more than the bottom 10% (Rowlingson 2012: 3).

The main long-term trend was for income and wealth inequality to fall during most of the 20th century until the 1980s when inequality began to grow. There is some suggestion that, since 1995, relative wealth inequality may have reduced due to those in the middle benefitting from house price inflation but those at the very top have seen huge absolute increases in wealth and there are still significant numbers of people with no or indeed negative net wealth. (Rowlingson 2012: 4)

In the five years since Rowlingson’s report, wealth and wealth inequality have grown again. According to a June 2017 report from the Resolution Foundation (D’Arcy & Gardiner 2017), UK wealth inequality is almost twice as high as inequality of household incomes. The report finds that overall wealth inequality has risen slightly, both within and across age cohorts, for each successive cohort born since 1960. For that minority who have enjoyed growth in their wealth, this has largely come from ‘unexpected wealth wind-falls’ (such as the house price boom in the South-East) and not ‘active savings behaviour’.

While there have always been rich people and poor people, powerful people and powerless ones, the relatively steady ‘direction of travel’ in the United Kingdom for two centuries and more, in matters of wealth/income as in a host of related social ‘goods’ (suffrage, freedom of expression and belief, open access to education and employment, non-discriminatory treatment regardless of race or gender or sexual orientation, age-longevity, good health and health

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care) has been to reduce inequality and to reduce disadvantage or the access differential. Gender and sexuality discrimination are mostly in decline, albeit still evident in many contexts. Similarly, race and ethnicity inequality have generally been in decline, notwithstanding local pockets of backsliding.

These reductions in unequal treatment are reflected in changes in the way people and institutions routinely talk about race, gender, and sexuality. The general trajectory of decline in discursively enshrined inequality in areas such as gender and ethnicity is not hard to demonstrate. One significant reflection of these improvements is the change in ways of talking about women, or people from black or minority ethnic groups, or with a minority sexual orientation, in the national press (e.g., in *The Times* or the *Mail* in the 1960s). Ways of describing our neighbours and fellow citizens that were once seemingly acceptable are now quite ‘unsayable’ – unpublishable in contemporary newspaper references to gender, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. In most of those parameters, inequality continues to decline, albeit now more slowly and not without local reversions. But with regard to wealth and income, a parameter that often powerfully enables several of the others, the progressive trajectory has not only been halted, it has been reversed.

1.2 Why Does Increasing Wealth Inequality Matter?

Is this of any great importance? Doesn’t this just tell us what we have always known, namely that the rich are rich and the poor are poor? The answer is that it matters a great deal; the wider divide that has grown up in living memory between the rich and poor in the United Kingdom and is probably growing yet larger is causing and will continue to cause great harm, not only locally to individuals but collectively and nationally.

In *The Impact of Inequality* (2005), social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson has shown with compendious statistics that in a country, however wealthy, where the gap between social classes grows too wide, there will be increases in kinds of dysfunctionality, crime and physical and mental illness. Even quite poor countries with a more equal wealth distribution are healthier and happier than richer but more unequal nations. The full title of Wilkinson and Pickett’s 2009 follow-up book encapsulates their powerful thesis, again supported by authoritative graphs and statistics: *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. Wilkinson and Pickett show that inequality of wealth and income is by far the clearest correlation and explanation for the ‘social failure’ of the most materially affluent societies (such as the United States and the United Kingdom). Affluent but comparatively equal countries such as Scandinavia and Finland (income-equal, note, not wealth-equal) perform considerably better than unequal ones on a great many measures, including infant

mortality, mental health, incarceration rates, educational attainment, and frequency of diabetes and obesity.

More recently, Danny Dorling's *A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier* (2016) has pointed to the very sharp rise in the UK mortality figures, most markedly for those over eighty, for the year mid-2014 to mid-2015, which are spread geographically and chronologically in ways that make increases in dementia, Alzheimer's or influenza unconvincing explanations. Why are the elderly dying markedly earlier (in effect prematurely)? Dorling suggests that the cause has been the austerity cuts and their effect on public health care for all, but especially for those elderly with long-term care needs. At the same time, statistics for recent years from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) show that the percentage of people at least somewhat satisfied with their own health (a good indicator of sense of well-being) is steadily declining – arguably in response to people's experience of growing austerity and inequality.

All *other* things being equal, acute wealth inequality leads to many negative outcomes for the population as a whole: higher infant mortality; lower life expectancy; higher likelihood of unemployment or low-paid work; lower educational attainment; higher incidence of chronic illness, addiction, service use and involvement in the Criminal Justice System. Here the phrase *for the population as a whole* is critical – and tempting to brush aside by the relatively affluent and well insured, who may not be aware of the evidence that *their* family wealth may lead to higher illness, unemployment or educational failure in other people, let alone have adverse consequences for themselves. But acute wealth inequality has been shown to have all these undesirable effects.

The consequences of the increased, US-style inequality emerging in the United Kingdom are many. In 2016, for example, the richest Americans lived up to fifteen years longer than the poorest, according to studies in *The Lancet* (Dickman et al. 2017). We now live in a country where three million children are at risk of hunger and malnourishment during school holidays, according to an All Party Parliamentary Group study headed by Frank Field (Forsey 2017). Highly unequal societies have less social mobility and lower aggregate educational attainment, but higher property crime and violent crime rates, than less unequal ones. Acute and preventable inequality is not only morally questionable, it is also enormously wasteful of the potential within a society as a whole, caused by disproportionate protection of a subsection of that society.

Acutely unequal economic relations can also lead to the kinds of morally or ethically dubious activities discussed in Michael Sandel's *What Money Can't Buy*, such as paying someone (perhaps a homeless person) to queue on your behalf for a place at some restricted-access event. In Sandel's view, in this and other practices (such as corporations' purchase of so-called dead peasant insurance to protect their own interests, and not those of the employee) the

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market approach has crossed a line and has developed in a direction that is damaging to democracy. We might also note the rise (return) of slavery in developed countries: in Britain this prompted the creation of a Minister for Modern Slavery and Organised Crime in the 2010–15 coalition government, and the Modern Slavery Act 2015, passed to facilitate the prosecution of traffickers. It is sobering to think that today in Britain the meaning of *slave driver* has regressed to the literal sense, in much usage.

What might a reduction in wealth inequality achieve? If the evidence from Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), Piketty (2014), Stieglitz (2012b), Atkinson (2015), Hills (2015), the Equality Trust (www.equalitytrust.org.uk) and many others is a guide, then it will usher in lower levels of suicide, imprisonment, mental illness, obesity, addiction, infant mortality, antisocial behaviour in the poor as well as the rich. Many other desiderata of living ‘fully’ are likely to flourish in a more equal, more Scandinavian-style economy, desiderata of the kind outlined in the ‘Capabilities Approach’ championed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum & Sen 1993). Even greater economic productivity is likely to ensue as a result of greater investment in developing the skills of those currently consigned to the ‘gig’, low-wage, low-skill economy.

1.3 Facts, Discourse, Myths

How did increased inequality become so ‘normal’ and accepted as reasonable? I believe it did so in part by changes in public discourses, changes in the discursive representation of everything in the news, so that this state of affairs became understood to be normal, reasonable and ordinary. A naturalising and legitimising within public discourses of kinds and degrees of inequality, previously much less generally accepted, took hold. This is the supposition the present study seeks to confirm.

Even if certain kinds of discursive difference among newspapers in the 1970s and the 2010s can be uncovered, are these differences anything more than epiphenomenal? Surely any evidence of change in the discursive representations of inequality is simply an effect, rather than a cause, of increased inequality. Discourse simply names or describes whatever the facts are; it cannot create or alter those facts.

Declaring that facts are unalterable and outside language is itself a rhetorical claim, and a continually disproven one. Mostly the speaker who begins a statement by saying ‘The fact of the matter is ...’ is adding some coercive stiffening to the expression of his or her own judgement. Facts are always (made) within language, and are therefore always susceptible to subtle reformulation (or, in Orwell’s dystopian vision, not so subtle alteration). Rocks and trees and the oceans and the moon arguably exist outside language – but it is impossible to talk

about them or make sense of them until we have clothed them in language, and have developed discourses around them.

In all domains of human activity and experience, language profoundly shapes the activity or experience itself; it is not a mere after-the-act labelling. Situations come about to a significant degree consequent upon the production and acceptance of a specific kind of enabling discourse. We see this in small ways with local promises and apologies and decisions, but we may struggle to see it in the larger ways, where a vast network of discourses represent the way things are, and this representation takes hold as valid, accurate, reasonable and normal. There is a long tradition of linguistic studies that underpin the present one, a tradition that understands a society's language habits and practices as shaping and influencing (but not straitjacketing) that society's customary and ordinary assumptions about everything. The tradition includes publications by Sapir (1983) and Whorf (1956), the exhortations of those who advise us to mind our language, much of the thinking in critical discourse analysis (surveyed in the following paragraphs), and studies like those of Cameron (1993) and Teubert (2010).

The shaping of thoughts, expectations and assumptions by language is not simply a matter of your saying *tomaydo* and my saying *tomahto*, of your calling a *tundish* what I call a *funnel*, or your saying *man and wife* when I say *husband and wife* or *partners*. Beyond the influence of habitual labels, there is the influence of habitual sentences, descriptions, metaphors, narratives and myths: extended discourse of one kind or another. Hills (2015) highlights how pernicious stories ('myths') are fed back into discussions of social security spending, seriously distorting ordinary people's political thinking. According to Hills' research, people imagine that nearly half the welfare budget is spent ('wasted') on unemployment benefits when the actual figure is approximately 1%; likewise they imagine that 50% of those on the jobseeker's allowance are chronically jobless and will still be unemployed after twelve months, when in fact fewer than 10% will be. The myths foster damagingly divisive misrepresentations, such as the imagined existence of a large cohort of 'work-shy' benefits claimants.

A myth of a different kind – often crucial to inequality apologists – is the idea that inequality is 'good for the economy', by inducing the ambitious to strive while handsomely rewarding the most successful, stimulating productivity and growth. The reality appears to be very different: too much inequality depresses economic activity, as the experience of the United States, with its similar pattern of affluence-cum-inequality to that now characterizing the United Kingdom, shows. In the quarter of a century or so from the end of World War II, the United States enjoyed an in-tandem improvement in both standard of living and equality, but this was followed by more than thirty years in which affluence and equality diverged, and in which, importantly, the increasing

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inequality depressed rather than stimulated the economy. As the economist Joseph Stiglitz commented in a widely disseminated article:

Defenders of America's inequality argue that the poor and those in the middle shouldn't complain. While they may be getting a smaller share of the pie than they did in the past, the pie is growing so much, thanks to the contributions of the rich and superrich, that the size of their slice is actually larger. The evidence, again, flatly contradicts this. Indeed, America grew far faster in the decades after the second world war, when it was growing together, than it has since 1980, when it began growing apart. (Stiglitz 2012a)

A highly unequal society (on any measure: gender, race, etc.) is inevitably also an undemocratic society. A society (increasingly a transnational society) where a whole class of families continues to have far greater wealth than the majority is one in which a wealth-based elite subsists. That elite inevitably wields far greater power and influence than everyone else, and that power inevitably extends to politics, undermining democracy.

The growth in UK wealth inequality is undisputed: the interesting question is how this happened. There are some 'grand narrative' explanations, such as the story of Western capitalism flourishing while Soviet bloc communism faltered and collapsed, leading to the reunification of Germany and 'the end of history', and the ever-growing reach of a neoliberal, capitalist, market-driven form of globalisation. I do not question this narrative, thus broadly drawn. But since the heady days of 1989–90 we have also seen 'history' refusing to end (contrary to predictions), with new ethnic- and religious-based wars arising, most notably from Islam-invoking terrorists, and equally 'globalised'. It is doubtful, also, that the state-shrinking, inequality-tolerant preference of Mrs Thatcher's brand of Conservatism was quite so 'inevitable' in the 1980s as it now seems (having been largely maintained by the Major and New Labour governments). If political developments had been only slightly different, and a Clarke-Heseltine Conservative government had ruled through the 1980s, a host of decisions, responses and policies might have cumulatively created a quite different effect. So whatever we say about the overarching story of increasingly entrenched neoliberalism, it is worth recognising that the larger outcomes emerged as a result of a vast network of choices that people made, or that others made and most people accepted or could not resist. These choices were of many kinds: about economic and financial arrangements, about jobs and working conditions; about pay, profits and taxes; and about political arrangements. But these choices were also language choices – including decisions about what one said was economically fair, reasonable, necessary or unavoidable.

1.4 ‘Ethical’ Differentiation

Discriminating representation is not always contentious. Difference of representation and evaluation on the grounds of race, age or gender are automatically questionable. But differences of representation or evaluation on grounds such as hair colour, dietary preference or musical ability would not ordinarily be regarded as discriminatory or questionable. Short students will rarely make the basketball team; bald actors tend not to be hired to appear in TV shampoo commercials. In plenty of competitions many must lose for a few to win.

Where do economic inequalities and disparities fit, relative to the preceding distinction? Are the very poor and the enormously rich simply like the extremes in a sport such as professional football: the top teams, continually winning and richly rewarded, compared with bottom-of-the-league impecunious clubs that mostly lose their matches? In many respects they are not, and should not be conflated. To see this we need only to tweak the example, away from professional football, to, for example, a game of tennis in the park between your son and your daughter. Suppose your daughter wins: would you be sure to speak long and loud about her accomplishments, and criticise your son’s ‘failings’ at equal length? Ice cream and a celebratory Pepsi for your daughter and just a glass of water for your son? Did I mention that the daughter is sixteen and has been expensively coached, the boy only half her age? These and similar factors are circumstantial details that would cause any reasonable parent to remember that tennis is only a game, and that you have more important connections to the two players, and they to each other, than this disproportionate focussing on who won and who lost would justify. Relations among people across society as a whole are (or should be) more like those within the family, where differences may be plentiful but episodes of winning and losing are of minor importance, and less like professional sport presented to a paying public, where the win/lose difference may be of great importance – but not, even for most professionals, to be pursued ‘at any cost’.

1.5 Inequality as ‘British’ Once More

A sense of identity is important for any person’s well-being, their sense of self; it is in part constructed or performed, especially through discourse, rather than simply given. Because we do so much identity performance through language, a large branch of linguistics, sociolinguistics, is devoted to its study, including how our acts of identity or identification are by the same token acts of distancing, exclusion and rejection, defining ourselves by our difference from various others. But every stating or performing of difference can turn into an assertion of an inequality, a hierarchy: ‘we are different from you ... and better or “higher” than you’. In our narrativising discourses, we tell or absorb stories

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about ourselves and how we are different from others. These include stories in the newspapers, among which are some that treat differential resources and opportunities, for different classes of Britons, as normal and reasonable.

Becoming again a more entrenched fact of life in modern Britain, wealth inequality is also becoming again a more central characteristic of British identity, of what it means to be British. If identity generally is ‘performed’ through the countless acts and communications an identity bearer engages in, national identity is performed in part through the content and assumptions of myriad public discourses about that nation which, at a given point in time, are accepted by that nation as indicative, a fair representation. Granted, identity is never monolithic and impregnable. It is likely in some places and at some times to be performed or represented as indeterminate, conflicted and variable. But if increased inequality is now a more pronounced part of the United Kingdom’s identity, we should find this more prominently reflected in many of our social and cultural practices, including such powerful public discourses as the print and online national newspapers.

It is in this internalisation of inequality, as part of British identity, that a supplement can be made to the powerful argument of Benn Michaels (2006) concerning inequality and cultural diversity in the even-more-unequal United States. Benn Michaels argues that liberal America has become preoccupied with diversity of identity – combatting potential discrimination based on race, gender, or any other basis of cultural difference – to the absolute neglect of wealth inequality. Indeed, defenders of diversity, he argues, feed the illusion that rectification of diversity failings will in time solve the inequality or poverty problem. The situation in the United Kingdom at least is arguably more nuanced, or pernicious. If being wealth unequal has been renewed as an element in British identity (i.e., it is in the nature of being British that a few of us are rich, most of us manage, and some are poor), then a celebrating of diversity does not involve a neglecting of inequality. Instead it is folded into our conception of diversity.

1.6 Why *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*?

Two national newspapers – the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* – are the focus of attention. My interest was in moderately centrist or centre-right newspapers, which one might expect broadly to encourage rather than resist the political and economic developments that have led to greater wealth inequality (compare, e.g., the *Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian*).

The *Daily Mail* has been severally described as ‘middle-market’ and ‘tabloid’; it is centre-right in politics and conservative in values generally, like *The Times*, but it is targeted at a lower-middle- and upper-working-class readership, who are more often women than men (55% to 45%). Far older than