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# Crossing Boundaries: Investigating ‘Fair’ in British Parliamentary Debates on Im/migration<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The paper is a by-product of a recent, cross-disciplinary research project, aiming at exploring linguistic and discursive patterns broadly construing ‘justice’ in a highly influential institutional setting of political discourse, i.e. the British House of Commons, as regards one of the most complex issues facing today's society: im/migration. Parliamentary language may, in fact, provide a privileged terrain for analysing the relationship between social practices and discourse, especially as regards the discussion of key, highly contested issues such as immigration. Moving from the assumption that justice' is a “human construction” (Walzer 1986; Eriksen 2016) embedded in specific systems of value and beliefs, and that immigration is “indeed a matter of justice” (Miller 2013: 5), the research investigates select patterns of ‘orientational meanings’ (Lemke 1992; Miller 1999), or evaluative and intersubjective stance (Martin and White 2005; Thompson and Hunston 2006) being typically construed within this particular register of political discourse. In particular, the paper focuses on 'fair' a a case study in a specialised corpus of UK parliamentary debates on the broad topic of im/migration, thus including issues of asylum and refugees.

## 1. Introduction: Aims and purpose

The paper draws on a wider research project aiming at exploring some linguistic and discursive resources broadly construing ‘justice’ in a highly influential institutional setting of political discourse - that of British parliament - as regards one of the most complex issues facing today's society; i.e. im/immigration (Bevitori 2017). Parliamentary language may, in fact, provide a privileged terrain for analysing the relationship between social practices and discourse, especially as regards the discussion of key, highly contested, issues such as immigration. Indeed, as argued elsewhere (see Bayley and Bevitori 2009: 81), in spite of the fact that parliament's significance in the decision-making process has been to some extent weakened by the strength of political parties, the personalisation of politics, as well as by the role of the media over time, what is said on the floor of the House is still crucial due to the symbolic role parliaments still play in

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liberal democracies, even in a 'post-democratic' era (Crouch2004)<sup>2</sup>.

Moving from the assumption that 'justice' is a "human construction" (Walzer 1986), embedded in specific systems of value and beliefs, and that immigration is "indeed a matter of justice" (Miller 2013: 5), the paper will look into select patterns of 'orientational meanings' (Lemke 1992; Miller 1999), or evaluative and intersubjective stances (Martin and White 2005; Thompson and Hunston 2006) being typically construed within this particular register of political discourse, with reference to the topic at issue, from a corpus-assisted discourse analytical perspective (inter alia Partington et al. 2004; Baker 2006; Baker et al 2013, Baker and McEnery 2015; Morley and Bayley 2009; Miller et al. 2014). While the analysis of the discourse(s) of immigration has always been one of the major concerns at the heart of the agenda of critical discourse analysis from a number of different angles and in a wide range of domains of analysis (inter alia Martin Rojo and van Dijk 1997; Kryzanowski and Wodak 2008; KhosraviNik 2010; Hart 2010; Wodak and van Dijk 2000), studies from corpus-based perspectives have mostly centred on representations of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in media discourse (for example, Baker and McEnery 2005; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; KhosraviNik et al. 2012; Baker et al 2013; Morley and Taylor 2013).

Drawing on a cross-disciplinary framework, the paper will take further steps by looking at aspects of interpersonal resources through which Members of Parliament (MPs) enact their stance as regards some key "socio-cultural" (Silverstein 2004) and, indeed, political conceptions of what is 'just', 'fair', or 'right' (or, conversely, 'unjust', 'unfair', etc.), in order to explore the complex interplay of discursive and socio-political dimensions of evaluation, ideological positioning vis-a-vis affiliation/alignment and strategies of legitimation (see, for example, Martin Rojo and van Dijk, 1997; van Leeuwen 1996; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; Reyes 2011). In particular, the qualitative analysis will concentrate on patterns of the word 'fair', as a select case study, by combining corpus linguistics techniques with the methodologies of critical analysis of

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of some developments towards a "more assertive" role of British parliament following the 2010 and 2015 general elections, see Russell 2015

discourse (CDA), firmly grounded within systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and appraisal theory (Halliday and Matthiesen 2004; Martin and White 2005), with the aim of providing a fine-grained investigation based on robust empirical data.

The paper is organised as follows: first an overview of the literature on the analysis of parliamentary discourse from linguistic and discourse analytical perspectives will be provided. In the following section, the theoretical framework and the methodological approach of analysis will be introduced; the corpus, data and some socio-political background will then be described. A discussion of the case study will follow and some concluding remarks will close.

## 2. On Parliamentary discourse

As a way of doing things with words (Austin 1962), parliamentary language may be described as a very distinct and composite type of political discourse regulated by long-standing rules and conventions (Bayley 2004; Ilie 2006 for an overview). In fact, as a deliberative, oratorical discursive genre, parliamentary debates may be defined as “institutional actions that are constitutive of parliamentary democracy” (van Dijk 2000: 20); i.e. ‘saying’ within this institutional setting is not only a linguistic activity per se but it is at the same time ‘doing’ a wide range of ‘political things’ such as endorsing or contesting a bill, justifying/legitimising a course of action and, perhaps more importantly, promoting different world views. In fact, parliamentary discourse is intrinsically institutional, involving participants (MPs) whose identity (or identities) as members of an institution may be crucial both in terms of role and party affiliation, as well as representatives of many different social groups and interests. At the same time, however, parliamentary discourse is also intrinsically “dialogical”; “a sequence of monologues which are intertextually and contratextually interwoven as MPs respond to what has been said previously, not just in the House but elsewhere” (Bayley 2004: 24). Indeed, “each community”, as Lemke (1985: 286) usefully reminds us: “has its own system o/ intertextuality: its own set of important or valued texts, its own preferred discourses, and particularly its own habits of deciding which texts should be read in the context of which others, and why and how”.

While a number of studies on parliamentary discourse have focussed on some of its distinctive rhetorical features, such as interruptions (Carbò 1992; Ilie 2001; Bevitori 2004), unparliamentary language and forms of 'impoliteness' (Harris 2001; Ilie 2004), other strands of research have combined corpus linguistics techniques within discourse analytical procedures, grounded on SFL, to trace and compare the usage of certain lexical items in parliamentary sittings across different cultural contexts (see Bayley 2004), as well as to examine the linguistic construal of the speaker's evaluative stance and intersubjective positioning (Miller 1999; Bevitori 2005; 2006; Miller and Johnson 2013).

As regards immigration, the analysis of parliamentary discourse has been a staple theme of much scholarly work from CDA perspectives (inter alia van Dijk 1993; 2000; Martin Rojo and van Dijk 1997; Wodak and van Dijk 2000). In particular, van Dijk (2000) discusses some discursive mechanisms involved in the reproduction of racism and anti-racism in order to arrive at a selection of relevant categories for an understanding of the role of parliamentary debates in the reproduction of discriminatory practices related to ethnic issues. Although it may well be agreed with van Dijk (2000: 47) that parliamentary discourse is characterised by 'prototypical', albeit 'non-exclusive features', it is my contention that a more fruitful description of the register would account for the co-selection of lexicogrammatical features having "a greater-than random tendency to occur" (Halliday and Martin 1993: 54; see also Bayley 2004), both at a global level, i.e. in terms of register, as well as at a more local level, i.e. the topic(s) being debated. In other words, the focus is on the ways in which probabilistic, "register-idiosyncratic" (Miller and Johnson 2013) features typically combine in a defined situational cultural context, being highly sensitive to the nature of the debates themselves.

### 3. Theoretical framework and methods

As stated, this study accounts for a crucial use of language in an institutional setting - that of parliament - and with regard to a specific topic of debate; i.e. im/migration. The main approach relates to the methodology

of (by now) firmly-established corpus- assisted discourse analysis (inter alia Partington et al. 2004; Baker 2006; Bayley and Morley 2009; Baker and McEnery 2015; Miller et al. 2014), implying a synergy of quantitative data embedded within more qualitative analytical processes of interpretation, as well as research procedures, and entailing the compilation of ad hoc specialised corpora, alongside the use of reference corpora for comparative purposes.

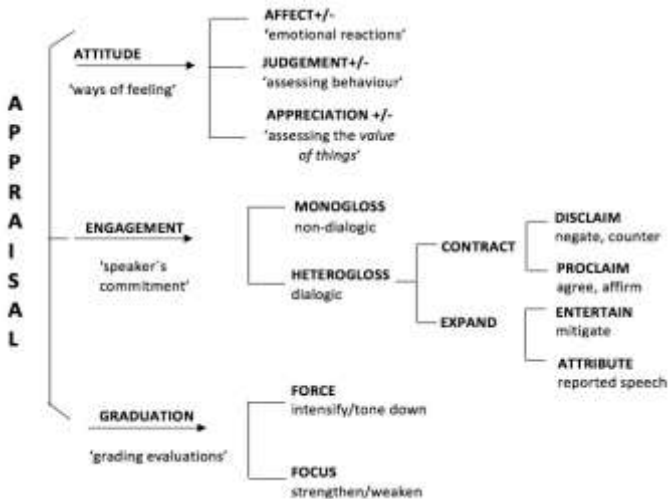
The framework used in this paper is theoretically grounded on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiesen 2004), as well as appraisal (Martin 2000; Martin and White 2005) - an interrelated set of systems dealing with the ways in which speakers express evaluation, attitude and emotions through language. At its core are two main issues: how speakers indicate positive or negative attitudes, as well as how they negotiate positioning with ‘dialogic’ partners (Martin and White 2005; see also Lemke 1992). To put it simply, the framework identifies three major systems: attitude, engagement and graduation. The system of attitude is further sub- divided into: affect, which deals with ‘ways of feeling’, i.e. linguistic resources construing emotional reactions; judgement, or ‘ways of behaving’, i.e. resources for assessing human behaviour in keeping with various normative principles; and, finally, appreciation, which considers resources for construing the value of things. Engagement, inspired by Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism and heteroglossia, is concerned with language resources by which speakers/writers negotiate their “relationships of alignment/disalignment vis-à-vis the various value positions referenced by the text and hence vis- à-vis the socially-constituted communities of shared attitude and belief associated with those positions” (Martin and White 2005: 95). Heterogloss resources, furthermore, are divided into two broad categories according to whether they are dialogistically contractive or expansive in their ‘intersubjective’ functionality; that is whether they make or, conversely, deny space to alternative viewpoints. Finally, graduation involves the scaling intensity or degree of evaluation. Figure I provides an overview of the basic framework:

#### FIGURE I

The Appraisal Framework (adapted from Martin and White 2005: 38)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey all these resources in greater detail and, due to space constraints, a working knowledge of the basic features will therefore be taken for granted; in particular, Martin (2000), Martin and White (2005). In this study, only some of the basic descriptive categories will be introduced and discussed.

#### 4. Corpus, data and socio-political context



The House of Commons IM/Migration corpus (henceforth HoCMigra corpus) is an ongoing project currently consisting of the complete transcripts of all the debates on im/migration held in the House of Commons in the span of time between 2010 and 2015, amounting to 147 full debates, in the range of approximately 830,000 running words. The corpus was designed with the aim of creating a comprehensive, specialised corpus of parliamentary debates in plenary sessions<sup>3</sup> on the broad topic of immigration, including asylum and refugees, to allow for a number of detailed investigations about specific issues. The debates were

<sup>3</sup> Debates in the Committees are not included in the corpus.

collected through the Official Hansard database, freely available online, using the following search words: \*migra\* (thus including immigration and migration), asylum, refugee\*, Calais.<sup>4</sup> A breakdown of the corpus per year, including both the total number of debates and the total number of words is provided in Table 1.

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TABLE I  
HocMigra Corpus 2010-2015

Year	Number of debates	Number of words
2010	17	72,196
2011	20	39,928
2012	12	45,340
2013	25	212,857
2014	29	208,406
2015	44	252,007
Overall	147	830,744

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In order to provide a critical understanding of the wider context, the socio-political background in the years 2010-2015 should - albeit very cursorily - be mentioned. Since 2015, in fact, Parliament in Britain has undergone a historic shift with the advent of a coalition government led by Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, bringing about a number of reforms (see Russell 2015 for an overview). However, the 2015 elections marked a new turning point with a massive loss of seats of Liberal Democrats and with the Conservative party winning a narrow majority. The main opposition groups were the Labour Party, which lost 26 seats since the period 2010-2015, and the Scottish National Party, with 56 Members, becoming the third largest party in the UK both in terms of membership as well as in the House of Commons.

The analysis for the present paper will focus on the year 2015, a 'key year' for the global migration crisis, which, in spite of the continuing decline of asylum claims between 2008-2015 (see Blinder

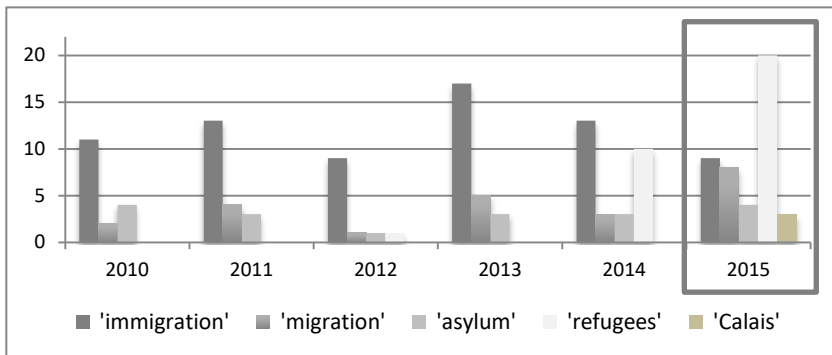
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<sup>4</sup> The Official Report of parliamentary debates at <https://hansard.parliament.uk> (last accessed March 2017)



2016), saw a dramatic increase in the number of debates, particularly on asylum and refugees (see Figure 2), probably also due to the launch of the ‘Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme’ (Home Office 2016)<sup>5</sup> Moreover, at a domestic level, discussions revolved around the new Immigration Bill 2015ho16, which received Royal Assent<sup>6</sup> in May 2016, and was meant to represent the latest extension of the Conservative government's goal to create a ‘hostile environment’ for irregular migrants in the UK by introducing new sanctions on illegal working, as well as new measures to implement immigration laws.

FIGURE 2  
Breakdown of debates in each category per year



The 2015 subcorpus contains 44 debates in the region of 252,000 running words; a number which may allow far deeper, more fine-grained analysis, and may thus enable greater control on the qualitative dimension. This means that the remainder of the HoCMigra corpus (2010-2014) was used for background quantitative comparison. Other reference corpora used in the study are the UK House of Commons 2003 (henceforth HoC 2003), a corpus consisting of all 152 sittings held in the

<sup>5</sup> See *Home Office Immigration Statistics. User Guide*, 2016, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-guide-to-home-office-immigration-statistics>. Last accessed March 2017

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/immigration-bill-receives-royal-assent>

Commons in 2003 and 979,812 running words, purposefully compiled for some previous research (see Bevitori 2007: 143; Bayley and Bevitori 2009: 81-82), and the *Hansard Corpus of British Parliament 1803-2005* containing 1.6 billion words, providing semantically-based searches.<sup>7</sup>

5. Around ‘justice’: exploring paths

As a matter of competing interpretations and, hence, competing world views, ‘justice’ is a very challenging issue to explore through corpora both in terms of its quantitative as well as qualitative dimensions. As regards the former, simply counting the frequency of the word/s in the semantic domain of ‘justice’ would provide only a very partial, and indeed, unreliable picture of what is at stake, due to the wide range of meanings associated with such a complex issue. Amongst the meanings of ‘justice’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the one which is of most interest for our purposes relates to sense III as, “The quality of being just or right, as a human or divine attribute; moral uprightness; just behaviour or dealing as a concept or principle”. Furthermore, according to *Roget’s* semantic classification, ‘justice’ is found in Class VI pertaining to *Emotion, Religion and Morality*, further sub-classified as “morality” (Section 4) which, alongside its ‘institutional’, or administrative meaning(s), i.e. ‘Judge’, deals with ‘Right’ (*justice, freedom from wrong, justifiability, righting wrong, redress, reforms*), as well as ‘Virtue’ (*uprightness, rectitude, moral r., character, integrity, principles, high principle, honour*). Similarly, a search for ‘justice’ in the Hansard Corpus, within the category “Morality: Rightness/justice provides the following words (Table 2):

Table II: Rightness/justice in *Hansard British Parliament (1803-2005)*

Semantic Tag: BD:03	Rightness/justice
	right (j) 2883029, <b>fair (j) 245407</b> , justice (n) 165550; rightly (r) 105743, fairly (r) 65303, just (j) 35743, respect (n) 31706

<sup>7</sup>The corpus is part of the Samuels Project (2014-20r6), available at: <http://www.hansard-corpus.org/>

Using the word 'just' (manually disambiguated for meaning) as an initial point of entry into our corpus, reveals that the word is indeed very rare, occurring only once in a speech by a Labour member of the Shadow cabinet in the debate about 'Immigration Detention' - a government practice of detaining migrants and asylum seekers for administrative purposes, which received strong criticism by different political groups. The debate was to address some of the concerns raised by a cross party inquiry strongly endorsing the call for a time limit for those detained in Immigration Removal Centres<sup>8</sup>:

1) Our central recommendation, as I say, is for a statutory limit on detention not simply because it **is more just and more humane**, but because it would be less expensive and more effective in securing compliance. (P. Blomfield (Lab), *Immigration Detention* 09/10)

Here the Labour MP, a member of the detention inquiry panel, is arguing in favour of posing a time limit for detention through attitudinal resources of positive judgement and graduation (more just and more humane), as well as through argumentative moves of concede/counter patterning (*not simply...but*) to negotiate ethical/moral meanings with a more 'utilitarian' vision of costs and benefits (less expensive/more effective). In spite of the fact that the word 'just' emerges as a dispreferred lexical choice through which MPs enact their stance towards issues of 'justice' in this domain and as regards the topic at issue, categories of 'morality', 'humanity' and 'fairness' appear instead as dominant in the corpus and may provide the lens through which different ideological positionings can be explored.

As a matter of fact, a quantitative analysis of the words *fair*, *moral* and *humane* across corpora yields interesting results. As illustrated in Figure 3, the occurrence of *fair* and *moral* is significantly higher (0.04 and 0.025 per hundred words respectively) compared to their frequencies both in the

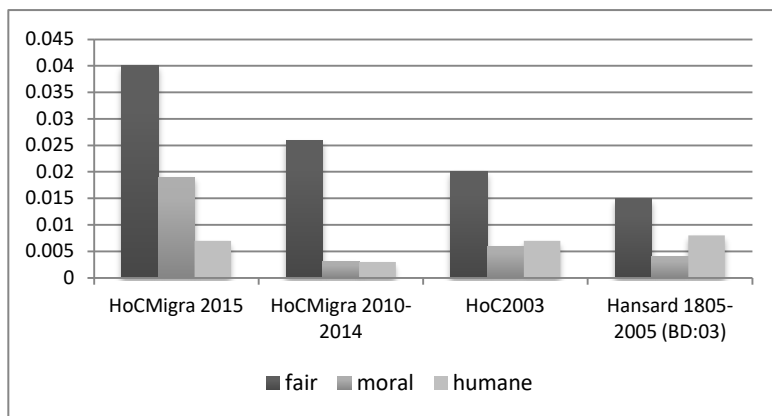
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<sup>8</sup>The 'Inquiry into the use of Immigration Detention' is available at <https://detentioninquiry.com/>. For a recent overview, see the briefing of the Observatory of Migration at <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk>.

remainder of the HoCMigra corpus and in the HoC 2003, as well as in the diachronic Hansard Corpus. The word *humane*, instead, despite having a higher frequency in 2015 with respect to the remainder of the corpus (0.007 vs. 0.003), has the same frequency in the HoC 2003, but its relative frequency is slightly lower than in the Hansard Corpus (0.008). The analysis will now focus on the word *fair* as a select case study in order to unpack meanings for qualitative investigation.

FIGURE 3

Relative frequency of fair, mora/ and humane across corpora



### 5.1. Case study: 'fair\*'

A quantitative analysis of the lemma 'fair\*', including the noun *fairness*, the adjective *fair* and the adverb *fairly* (manually disambiguated for meaning) shows that the lemma has a relative frequency of 0.05 compared to 0.03 in the remainder of the corpus. The most frequent word form is the adjective *fair* (109 instances, including the comparative form *fairer* occurring 7 times and, incidentally, all of them collocating with 'system'), which represents 77 per cent of all instances of the lemma in the corpus. Its relative frequency is 0.04 per hundred words, compared to 0.025 in the remainder of the HoCMigra corpus (2010-2014), as well as to 0.02 and 0.015 in the HoC2003 and Hansard 1805-2005 respectively (see Figure 3). Although notions of 'fairness' have always been at the core of parliamentary

practices over time, with rather distinct meanings in Westminster procedural rules (see Palonen 2014 for a discussion), a look at the most relevant words typically associated with the node word *fair* within a span of five words to the left and to the right provides us with more contextually relevant results. The list of collocates, in fact, includes the nouns *share* (18), *play* (14), *people* (14), *refugees* (10), *immigration* (9), *UK* (9), *country* (5); verbs such as *take/taking* (13); the adjective *British* (7), the personal pronouns *we* (10), *our* (9), and *its* (9). Interestingly, though, the analysis of the most frequent three-word clusters, (see Table 3) reveals that the lexical item is also typically co-selected with two distinct sets of meaning in the corpus, which to some extent is related to the different ‘voices’, or ideological positioning, of the political parties in the House. In particular, patterns of the noun phrase ‘fair share of’ and the verbal phrase ‘is fair to/on’ will be looked into more closely in the following sub-sections.

Table III. Three-word clusters of ‘fair’

N Cluster	Freq.
1 IS FAIR TO	11
2 FAIR SHARE OF	10
3 IT IS FAIR	9
4 ITS FAIR SHARE	6
5 OUR FAIR SHARE	6
6 IT IS NOT	6
7 IS NOT FAIR	6
8 FAIR TO BRITISH	5

Meaning patterns relating to the adjective ‘fair’, as a pre-modifier (or epithet) of the noun ‘share’, in the noun group ‘fair share of’, indicate that the grammatical participants in the transitivity structure are *UK/country/Britain*, alongside the personal pronoun *we* the material process *take/taking*, as well as meanings of obligation/necessity - *must/should/need to* - whereby MP speakers act to align the hearer(s) towards the necessity for Britain to fulfil its commitment and take responsibility towards accepting an equitable number of refugees. Table 4 provides a sample concordance of ‘fair share’.

TABLE 4

## Sample Concordances of 'fair share'

sibility also to resettle a fair share of **refugees** in the UK argument against **taking** our fair share from the current migration, and we *should* accept our fair share of the **refugees** who a programme so that we do our fair share, like other countries listing. We *need to take* our fair share of **refugees** in the UK nment to *commit to take* our fair share of **responsibility**, as debate is about **taking** our fair share. The Government have he United Kingdom **takes** its fair share of **people who are** see nd that Britain must do its fair share to help. The petition and was *willing to take* its fair share of **refugees**, as agree First, the UK *must take* its fair share of **refugees**. It is ri that the UK was **taking** its fair share of **the burden**. Alison nt do not relent and **take** a fair share of **the refugees** who h

From the point of view of interpersonal resources, or appraisal, the pre-modifier 'fair', co-selected with the noun group 'share of refugees', thus realises meanings of appreciation, i.e. what is *fair* (right, equitable or appropriate) in a given circumstance. These combined meanings at both an ideational and interpersonal level (transitivity and appraisal), or 'couplings' (Martin 2000), have a major impact on how MP speakers act to align or affiliate with their hearer(s), and are instrumental in providing 'moral' legitimation for an intended course of action. Moreover, on closer inspection, all instances of the three-word cluster 'fair share of' in this context are uttered by members of the opposition (especially SNP members), which seems to suggest that the phrase is typically used to express a broadly pro-immigration stance as the following expanded examples show:

2) A practical humanitarian response to this tragedy requires three main strands of action. First, **the UK must take its fair** [+appreciation] **share of refugees**. It is right [+judgement: ethics] that we should seek to relocate those families and individuals in Syria and in the region who are in immediate peril. [ . . . ] It is the right [+judgement: ethics] thing to do. (T. Ahmed-Sheikh (SNP), *Humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean* 09/09).

3) **We need to take our fair share** [+appreciation] **of refugees in the UK**, as we have a **proud** [+affect] tradition of doing in the past, from the Kindertransport in the 1930s to the Ugandan refugees in the 1970s. Even Mrs Thatcher took some of the Vietnamese boat people, although not as many as other countries. (J. Cherry (SNP),

*Calais 06/04*).

As can be observed in example 3, different rhetorical strategies and discursive mechanisms of legitimation are at work. Firstly, through reference to collective memory, both in terms of past habits and behaviour ('we have a proud tradition of doing in the past') and, secondly, through reference to an institutional authority ('Mrs Thatcher'). The use of the adjective 'proud', as a resource of affect, triggering an emotional reaction, is quite frequent in the corpus and is typically associated with the words 'tradition'/'history', as well as 'country'/'Britain'/'UK', and the inclusive 'we'. Appealing to feelings of 'pride', as a rhetorical strategy typically used by members of government to legitimise their own actions in order to enforce consent, the phrase is also used 'contratextually' by members of the opposition to challenge the government 'not doing enough' to find a solution the problem, as the following exchange (4) illustrates:

4.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) There are more refugees today than at any time since the Second World War because of so much violence and turmoil in the world. Support in the region is welcome, but it is not enough. Will the Home Secretary acknowledge that the Government's refusal to accept some kind of EU refugee quota system is **unfair and irresponsible**? In the past, she has said that **Britain has a proud tradition of standing up for refugees**: now is the time to prove it by supporting such a measure.

Mrs May (The Secretary of State for the Home Department): The hon. Lady should **take pride** in the work that the **United Kingdom is doing to support refugees** from Syria (*Calais 07/14*).

Interestingly, Mrs May's pragmatic response about the country 'doing' its bit to help refugees resonates with the only single instance of 'fair share' in the corpus uttered by a government member, the Minister for Security and immigration, in response to a Labour member challenging the government for not adhering to the UN programme to relocate Syrian refugees in Northern Europe:

5. James Brokenshire (The Minister for Security and Immigration): **This country is doing its fair share** in many different ways through the direct aid that is being

provided £700 million that is directly affecting and benefiting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people [...] (*Syrian Refugee 01/05*)

To sum up, as is evident from the findings, meaning patterns of the noun phrase ‘fair share of refugees’, co-selected with the verb ‘take’, as well as with resources of obligation/necessity, are typically instantiated in the discourse(s) of the opposition in order to negotiate the necessity for the UK to act impartially inside Europe in the face of the migration crisis. This meaning pattern may thus be seen to epitomise a pro-immigration stance in the UK parliamentary context of debates about im/migration. However, by looking at meanings of ‘fair’ in the cluster ‘is fair to/on’, a very different picture seems to emerge, to which I shall now turn.

### 5.2.2 ‘is fair to/on’

The analysis of the phrase ‘is fair to/on’ shows that the grammatical participants in the transitivity structure are the UK immigration system, as a left-hand collocate construing the Actor, and the British people/citizens as well as ‘legitimate’ migrants, being construed as the beneficiary of the ‘fair’ system. Attitudinally, ‘fair’ realises meanings of judgement through which members of the government highlight the impartiality of the system according to certain normative principles:

6. Visa regimes are an important part of the **UK’s immigration system**, which **is fair to British citizens and legitimate migrants**, and tough on those who flout the rules. (K. Bradley, *Immigration Bill 01/27*)

7. The Bill will ensure the public’s expectation of a **system** that **is fair to British citizens and legitimate immigrants** while being tough on those who abuse the system and flout the law. We believe that the measures in the Bill are **right, proportionate and necessary** and I commend it to the House. (J. Brokenshire, *Immigration Bill 10/13*)

8. As I said on Second Reading, we must continue to build an **immigration system** that **is fair to British citizens and people who come here legitimately** to **play by the rules** and contribute to our society. [...] Immigration has brought **tremendous benefits** “to our economy, our culture and our society” **but**, as I have said before, when net migration is too high, and the pace of change too fast, it puts pressure on schools, hospitals, accommodation, transport and social services, and it can drive



down wages for people on low incomes. **That is not fair on the British public and it is not fair** on those **who come here legitimately and play by the rules.** (T. May, *Immigration Bill* 12/01)

Unlike meanings of ‘fair’ as discussed above (section 5.2.1), corpus data show that this meaning pattern is typically instantiated in the government’s discourse, especially in the debates on the new Immigration Bill. Meanings of ‘fair’ in this sense tend to construe the British citizen, as well as the ‘legitimate’ immigrant (although who is to be defined as ‘legitimate’ would need more careful scrutiny), as beneficiaries of the system. Unsurprisingly, findings also point towards a marked polarisation, or dichotomisation, between ‘us-and-them’ as one of the most frequent topoi of parliamentary debates on immigration, as well as one of the most powerful legitimising mechanisms, in which Britain is typically represented by Conservative members as a victimised, ‘compassionate’ country, whose ‘values’ need to be protected by a potentially unfair immigration system:

9. **It is right** that we look for a fundamental change. [...] It would be nice to hear from the Minister that he gets that and that he is focusing on an effective way to achieve **what the people of this country want**: that we remove, effectively and **compassionately**, people with no right to be here, while standing up for things **we want to protect** namely, **our compassion and our values**. If some of the amendments we are proposing today are not pressed or if we do not hear a sufficient response from the Minister, I fear that **the true victims** will continue to be the **British sense of compassion** and the **British sense of justice** when we manage immigration. (R. Fuller (Con), *Immigration Bill* 12/01)

## 6. Concluding remarks

Although principles of ‘justice’ and ‘fairness’ are at the heart of any society, an understanding of what these are and how they can be achieved is a more difficult matter. In fact, given the quintessentially adversarial nature of parliamentary debates, an investigation into what ‘justice’ entails in this domain may prove crucial. Moving from a critical corpus-assisted discourse analytical perspective, the paper has aimed to disentangle some of the meanings of ‘fair’ which are seen to typically permeate the

discourses about immigration of the two opposing voices in the British House of Commons; i.e. the ruling party in government and the opposition. While the quantitative analysis has brought out some dominant motifs in the broad semantic domain of 'justice', the qualitative analysis of 'fair', as a select case-study for closer inspection, has focussed on some distinct modes through which members of parliament act politically by enacting their evaluative stance.

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