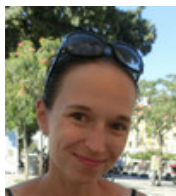


# All things to all people: the UK–EU relationship in David Cameron’s speeches



David Cameron was the Prime Minister who promised and delivered a referendum on EU membership, shortly after which he left politics. How did he present the UK–EU relationship during his premiership? [Monika Brusenbauch Meislová](#) finds that he adopted a combination of antithetical sub-discourses, which he naturally failed to integrate into a coherent and sustainable discourse.

Under the premiership of the David Cameron, the relationship between the UK and the EU took a dramatic turn. It was him who, in 2013, under sustained pressure from his own backbenchers, made a commitment to renegotiate the UK’s relationship with the EU and hold an in/out referendum, having plunged Britain’s position in Europe into the greatest uncertainty in generations.

To understand Cameron’s European legacy, it is essential to understand his European discourse. Cameron’s EU policy has been widely interpreted as inconsistent and ambiguous, and I argue that it was the conflicting discourses and rival imaginings on the UK–EU bilateral relationship that help explain the high degree of ambivalence, paradox and misunderstanding associated with his EU policy.

Drawing on insights from the theory of critical constructivism and its relation to discourse, I worked from a core assumption that talking about the relationship between the UK and the EU does not merely describe a given (or envisioned) reality; it also constructs it. As such, Cameron’s perceptions of the UK–EU relations did not only impact the political landscape on which debates over Britain’s future relationship with (and within) the EU were playing out, but also had direct implications for the practice of the UK’s EU policy. It is after all, the Prime Minister who fundamentally shapes [the content and direction](#) of the British official discourse on the EU.

A detailed analysis of Cameron’s 60 official speeches showed that his discourse on the UK–EU relationship was highly complex, varied, and multi-layered. More specifically, it revealed three dominant sub-discourses: (1) of integration; (2) of differentiation and (3) of reform.

## Three dominant sub-discourses

As illustrated by Tables 1 and 2, these sub-discourses substantially differed from each other, both factually and structurally, and also in terms of their main focus. Each possessed unique rhetorical features, used a different vocabulary and highlighted different facets of mutual ties/interactions, therefore producing quite different imaginaries of the UK–EU relationship.

*Table 1: Key words and phrases associated with Cameron’s sub-discou*

Integration sub-discourse	Differentiation sub-discourse	Reform sub-discourse
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperation</li> <li>• Partnership</li> <li>• UK at the heart of the single market</li> <li>• UK’s leading role</li> <li>• Prosperity</li> <li>• National interest</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National identity</li> <li>• National interest</li> <li>• Island character of the country</li> <li>• EU’s deficiencies and mistakes</li> <li>• High rate of EU nationals’ migration to the UK</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reform</li> <li>• Efficiency</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Deregulation</li> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• <i>Renegotiation of EU r</i></li> <li>• In/out EU referendum</li> </ul>

*Table 2: Overview of main topics and issues in Cameron’s sub-discourses on the UK-EU*

	<b>Integration sub-discourse</b>	<b>Differentiation sub-discourse</b>	<b>Reform su</b>
<b>Main topics and issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on constructive cooperation</li> <li>• Rejection of British isolationism</li> <li>• Mutual interdependence</li> <li>• Shared interests</li> <li>• Historical links between the UK and the EU</li> <li>• Emphasis on economic parameters of the mutual relationship</li> <li>• Vast contribution of the single market to the British economy</li> <li>• EU as a means to an end</li> <li>• Efforts to promote British national interests within the EU</li> <li>• Leading role of the UK within the EU</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pointing to differences / contrasting characteristics of the UK and the EU</li> <li>• Contrasting British and European identities</li> <li>• Emphasis on British “us” in contrast to European “others”</li> <li>• Positioning the UK outside the EU</li> <li>• Low level of European self-identification among the Brits</li> <li>• A strong positive self-presentation</li> <li>• Criticism of the EU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Excessive regulation and bureaucracy</li> <li>○ Low level of economic competitiveness</li> <li>○ Lack of democratic accountability</li> </ul> </li> <li>• British frustration with the EU membership</li> <li>• Sense of rivalry in the mutual relationship</li> <li>• The EU as a crucial benchmark for measuring UK’s success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need fo</li> <li>• Changin</li> <li>• Vision :</li> <li>• 21st cen</li> <li>• Better c</li> <li>• the UK</li> <li>• the EU</li> <li>• Address</li> <li>• the Brit</li> <li>• More co</li> <li>• and flex</li> <li>• EU</li> <li>• Greater</li> <li>• nationa</li> <li>• parliam</li> <li>• Democr</li> <li>• account</li> <li>• fairness</li> <li>• Volume</li> <li>• migrati</li> <li>• Leading</li> <li>• within a</li> <li>• Renego</li> <li>• of Brita</li> <li>• membe</li> <li>• Pledge</li> <li>• referenc</li> </ul>

The most positive out of the three was the integration sub-discourse, within which the relationship between the UK and the EU was typically constructed as positive and complementary. Here, Cameron aligned himself with a discursive code that perceived both actors as natural, stable, and reliable partners and framed their interests as complementary. He built bridges between the UK and the EU, accentuated specific multi-level links between them and highlighted the benefits of EU membership. The EU was discursively portrayed here in an inclusive way, with Britain as one of its leading member states

The differentiation sub-discourse pointed in an entirely different direction. Its main tenet was the emphasis on the differences (or even antagonisms) between the UK and the EU and the problematic issues of mutual relations. Cameron frequently deployed the so-called “othering concept”, discursively constructing Britain in opposition to the EU, which was often depicted as an alien body – as a monolith, separate, outward, foreign entity, on the other side of the Channel that was external to Britain and alien to the British way of life. The UK was no longer a member of the EU, but an outsider.

Cameron’s reform sub-discourse was aimed at redefining the status quo – i.e. reforming the existing patterns of the UK–EU relationship. In a recurrent claim of this sub-discourse, Cameron called for a reform of the UK–EU relationship and thereby also of the EU. The desired reform was to modify Britain’s relationship with the EU ‘once and for all’, with Cameron positioning himself into a role of someone with a clear, logical and practical plan to achieve this change.

As can be seen, Cameron’s discourse identities and rhetorical positions vis-à-vis the UK–EU relationship were marked by profound incompatibilities and contradictions, as summarized in Table 3.

*Table 3: Overview of basic features of Cameron’s sub-discourses on the UK-EU relations*

	<b>Integration sub-discourse</b>	<b>Differentiation sub-discourse</b>	<b>Reform sub-discourse</b>
Overall nature of the relationship	Constructive partnership	Antagonistic character	Redefinition of relationship
Perception of mutual interactions	Stable, reliable partners	Rivals, potential enemies	Teacher-pupil relationship
Connotations of the relationship	Positive	Negative	Neutral (positive and negative)
Relationship based on	Similarities	Differences	Proposals for settlement
(A)symmetry of the relationship	Symmetry	Asymmetry	Asymmetry
(In)dependence within the relationship	Mutual interdependence	UK independent of the EU	Neutral position
Nature of the UK vis-à-vis the EU	Inclusive: UK as part of EU	Exclusive: UK outside EU	UK demanding position vis-à-vis EU
	UK within EU	UK versus EU	UK and EU as equals
Nature of the EU vis-à-vis the UK	EU as a partner	EU as the other	EU as a challenge
Saliency of issues in the relationship	Primacy of economic issues	Primacy of political issues	Attention given to economic and political issues
Overall tone of Cameron’s language	Conciliatory	Offensive	Patronising
Strong presence of the sub-discourse (time-wise)	First half of Cameron’s first cabinet; pre-referendum campaign	Second half of Cameron’s first cabinet	Period between Bloomberg (2010–2013) and the end of EU reform (February 2013)

The reform sub-discourse was in many respects complementary with, and related to, the other two sub-discourses and could somewhat co-exist with (or be accommodated to) either of them. The differentiation and integration sub-discourses, however, were in many ways polar opposites, displaying elements of serious incompatibility and lying in substantial tension with one another. Parallel usage of such conflicting discourses by the same speaker at the same time might have sent mixed messages to the audience and generated confusion, as exemplified aptly by Cameron’s Bloomberg Speech of January 2013, which has been labelled by a Liberal Democrat politician as ‘[a speech of contradictions](#)’, in which he ‘tried to be all things to all men and managed to fail on every possible count’. In a way, the Bloomberg speech serves as a perfect example of Cameron’s incompatible narratives and rival imaginaries on Britain’s relations with the EU, concentrated in one place.

### The EU as a discursive battleground

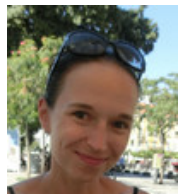
To conclude, the EU, indeed, proved to be, as Thomas Diez put it, a ‘discursive battleground’ for Cameron. For him, framing the UK–EU relationship was a policy dilemma of the highest order, yet he failed to integrate these largely antithetical sub-discourses into a coherent and politically sustainable discourse on the EU.

In principle, the conflicting patterning of Britain’s relations with the EU closely reproduces the complexity of Cameron’s European agenda. At the same time, it also reflects his attempts to address several audiences simultaneously in a bid to establish the broadest possible coalition of voters and supporters. Most prominently, manoeuvring through and around three largely incompatible discourses mirrors his efforts to reconcile fundamental EU-related tensions within the Conservative Party. Indeed, the ambivalence of Cameron’s discourse stems, in a large part, from his attempts to neutralise an issue that has been one of the most divisive in British contemporary politics. In this sense, it aptly illustrates the long-term struggle of British party leaders and governing elites to manage Europe as well as the country’s troubled accommodation to the EU.

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Note: the above draws on the author’s [published work](#) in British Politics.

### About the Author



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