Brexit in Hansard – a case study
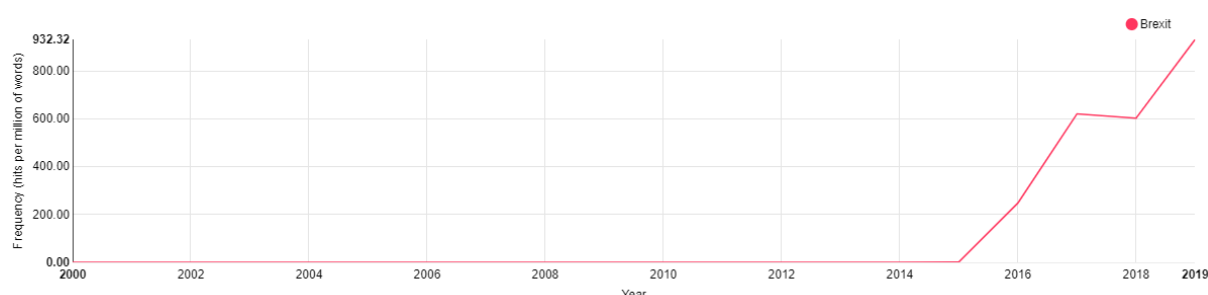
Brexit is both the most obvious and potentially the least satisfying topic for a case study in the records of Hansard. The word itself didn't exist before 2012 and it is therefore no surprise to find that a basic search for the word 'Brexit' on the Hansard at Huddersfield (HaH) web application produces a flat line followed by a steep rise in usage:

What we do find out from this simple search, though, is that 'Brexit' didn't start to be used in parliament until 2015, about a year before the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union on June 23rd 2016. From zero to 932.32 occurrences per million words in five years is a rise consistent with the increasing focus in parliament on this huge decision and its ramifications.

Using the advanced search screen to search for 'Brexit' within a limited period (of less than 5 years) we can look in some more detail at how the word has been used since its invention and compare usage across different months. The following graph, for example, nuances the picture a little as we see the general rise in usage up to the end of 2019. Note that, although this is not a consistent rise across the period, the troughs that go right down to zero are not part of that picture as they represent recess months where parliament was not sitting.
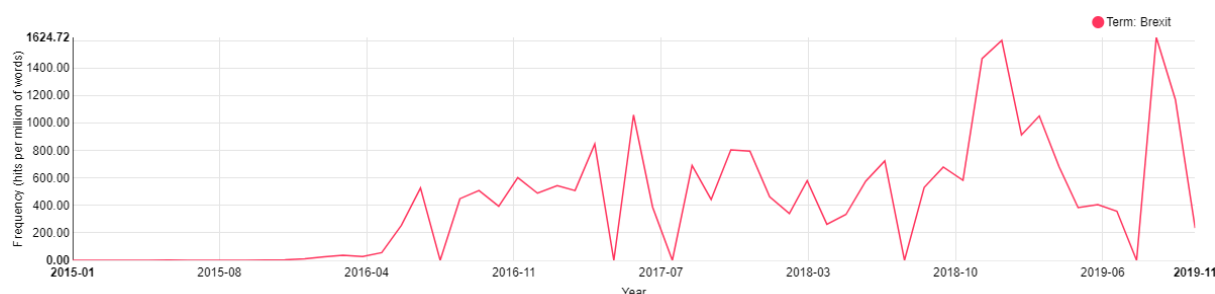
Brexit in context

There are many directions a study of the word 'Brexit' can take from here. One example would be to take a look at the context of the word for different periods of this graph. For example, if we double-click on the earliest uses of the word in the Commons, it is striking

that in that period it was treated as a countable noun (it was used with an indefinite article, 'a') and this implies that there could be more than one (type of) Brexit:

Date	Member	Contribution
2015-11-10	Pat McFadden	... trength in trade with the rest of the world, and stands together to combat the urgent security problems that we face. We do not stand for the nationalism that says that we would be better off out, or for a **Brexit** that would see Britain weaker in power and influence, and diminished in the eyes of the world. In his speech this morning and in the letter to the President of the European Council, the Prime ... *[0 more]*
2015-11-05	Calum Kerr	... ltural policy payments make the difference between bankruptcy and continuing in business. The Secretary of State has been repeatedly asked to confirm whether those payments would continue in the event of a **Brexit**. Simply batting that question away is no longer acceptable. What will happen?... *[0 more]*

Still in the period before the referendum, February 2016, we find that there begins to be a mixture of indefinite (countable) 'a Brexit' and the pattern that takes over from here onwards, which is 'Brexit' as a proper noun – an official name – for something we are all expected to recognise:

| Date	Member	Contribution
2016-02-25	Edward Leigh	... cretary is rightly doing a sort of cost-benefit analysis of this issue. Why do the Government not institute an independent study, by a genuinely independent body, to go in some detail into the effects of a **Brexit**, plus or minus, on, say, GNP? That would surely be very useful.... *[0 more]*
2016-02-25	Nick Herbert	... My right hon. Friend is rightly drawing attention to the potential impact of **Brexit** on our economy, but may I take him back to the issue of security? It was suggested earlier that there would be no adverse consequences for security from our leaving the European Union, because we would remain members of NATO. Did he hear the remarks this morning of the former Secretary-General of NATO, Anders Rasmussen,... *[0 more]*
2016-02-25	Stuart Donaldson	... any other people my age. I have been contacted by a number of young people who are slightly worried about what will happen when they leave school or are in their university holidays. They fear that a **Brexit** might mean that they will not have the opportunity to jet off easily to Magaluf or Zante for the aforementioned holiday. Will they have to go through the hassle of getting visas just for a week or t... *[0 more]*
2016-02-25	Stewart Jackson	... ers that we must stay at the heart of Europe, fight our corner and reform within. That has failed and it is a fool's errand to believe that it will not be a calamitous failure in the future. We know what **Brexit** will be like, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) has said. In conclusion, all power is a leasehold given to us on trust, and it is not ours to give away. For to... *[0 more]*

This pattern, used by almost everyone on both sides of the argument from mid 2016 onwards, helps to cement the idea that 'Brexit' is a known phenomenon, even though the argument about what exactly it refers to rages for another three years (and counting). This proper name, not matched on the other side, simplified the national conversation to the point where one of the Prime Ministers of this period (Theresa May) was able to repeat 'Brexit means Brexit' and another one (Boris Johnson) won a resounding election victory on the slogan 'Get Brexit done!'. Without the proper name, this would have been harder to achieve. The alternative, sometimes known as 'Remain', suffers from a number of problems, not least of which is that it is not a noun (i.e. not a name) but derives from an everyday verb. 'Get Remain done!' was never going to work as a slogan. We can see how embedded the proper noun 'Brexit' becomes by the end of this period in these examples:

Date	Member	Contribution
2019-11-05	Dominic Raab	... hening the special relationship. I spoke to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, affirming our leading role in NATO and our commitment to it. Above all, I am focused on supporting the Prime Minister in getting **Brexit** done so that this country can move forward as an open, outward-looking country with global reach and global ambition.... *[0 more]*
2019-11-05	Emily Thornberry	... mpted Russian interference in the 2016 referendum, whether that was successful or otherwise? I fear it is because it realises that the report will lead to other questions about the links between Russia and **Brexit**, and with the current leadership of the Tory party, that risk derailing its election campaign. There are questions about the relationship between the FSB-linked Sergey Nalobin and his "good fr... *[1 more]*
2019-11-05	Stephen Gethins	... ons were damning, and I am not surprised he did not answer them. Given the threat Russia poses to elections, and given that his Government have wanted an election for months, why is this not a priority? **Brexit** has taught us that this Government like to hide unhelpful reports—lots of them—so prove me wrong and publish the report.... *[0 more]*

Nothing in the context of these examples queries or nuances what 'Brexit' is – we are at the point where the politicians from all sides are treating its referent as a given.

Brexit Campaigners

With the establishment of 'Brexit' as a proper noun, the derived nouns for people who campaign for it started appearing quite early in the period. Here is a graph resulting from an advanced search from early 2016 to November 5th 2019 with the search terms 'Brexite*' (to catch 'Brexiter/s' and 'Brexiteer/s' but not 'Brexit' itself) and 'Remoaner*' as well as the less judgmental 'Remainer*' to catch both singular and plural uses of these terms:
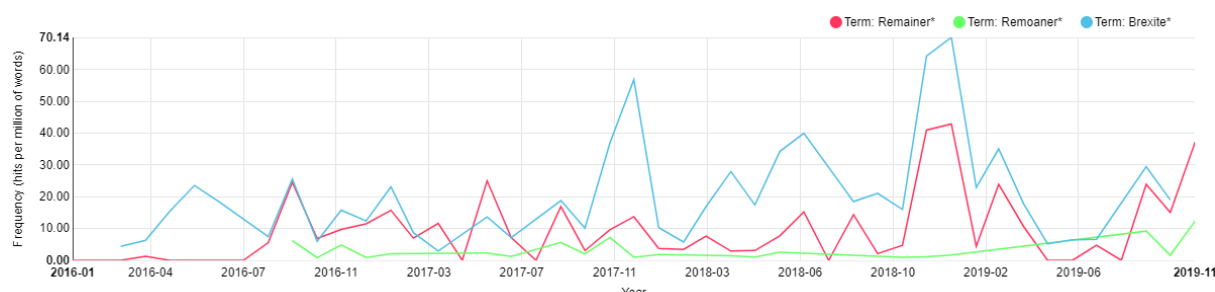
Identifying those in favour of the UK leaving the European Union by using a convenient label derived from a proper noun, is another part of the process of cementing the presupposed existence of Brexit in the national psyche, whether with a neutral ('Brexiter') or a more critical ('Brexiteer') label. Note that the capitalisation of all of these words, including 'Brexit' itself, derives from our understanding that it comes from 'British/Britain' and this pattern continues into Hansard, where neither of the invented words for supporters of the other side (remainer/remoaner) is capitalised in the same way. The negative connotations of remoaner, of course, also meant that this label had to be repeatedly rejected by those campaigning to remain:

	2019-09-26	Helen Hayes	... In Dulwich and West Norwood, 77% of people voted to remain in the EU —the seventh highest pro-remain vote in the country. My constituents are not **remoaners**; they are not anti-democratic. They are citizens with deeply held and sincere convictions. Yet since June 2016, 77% of my constituents and 48% of voters across the country have been told that we must be quiet and that our views no longer count. We have bee... *[0 more]*

There is much more that could be done to examine the behaviour of one of the most extraordinary new lexical items in English. You could, for example, examine the context of the word, by using the KWIC (Key Word In Context) format, as seen here:

2017-12-21	Liam Byrne	page in The Daily Telegraph attacking Conservative Members for being	"**Brexit**	mutineers". Leave.EU and Westmonster probably picked up that story. Westmonster
2017-12-21	Jim Shannon	should work with the rest of us to ensure that	**Brexit**	happens. I am simply trying to ascertain whether Russian influence

And if you wanted to see the patterning of such contexts, you can also download the occurrences into a spreadsheet and organise the context to pick out patterns that may be of interest, such as these, which show the metaphor of the cliff edge being used by a number of speakers:

seems to be to drive the car fast towards the	Brexit	cliff and when it leaves terra firma, like Dick Dastardly
scale tax avoidance in this country; and reject the Tory's	Brexit	cliff edge and the race to the bottom that will
Members of this House will experience. We sit on the	Brexit	cliff edge with the UK's constitutional future under question, ǝ
to fees in education; and, as we teeter towards the	Brexit	cliff edge, societally I am opposed to fees in education.
be swept aside as we proceed headlong to the hard	Brexit	cliff edge. Today, in Scotland, perhaps the Government were ǝ
stake for business as the UK edges closer to the	Brexit	cliff edge. We know that the Secretary of State has
Instead, they are attempting to drive our economy off the	Brexit	cliff like a lemming. A decade on from a global
coastal communities who are peering over the edge of the	hard-Brexit	cliff that the Government have created. I will not apologise

## Comparing Brexit discourse to previous periods

There are many similar searches that can be carried out in relation to the single word 'Brexit' and yet there may also be some value in seeing what the other words in such a rich database might indicate, during the period just before and just after this momentous referendum. The 'Explore' function, for example, allows us to consider what the keywords are of the period from the referendum on June 23rd 2016 to the end of the data (currently November 5th 2019) as compared with the 18 months (from Jan 1st 2015) prior to the referendum. Words identified as key with this tool are those that appear significantly more frequently in the period after the referendum compared with the period before the referendum. For this tool, keywords are those of which we are 99.99% certain there is a statistically significant difference in the frequency of word appearance when comparing the two corpora.
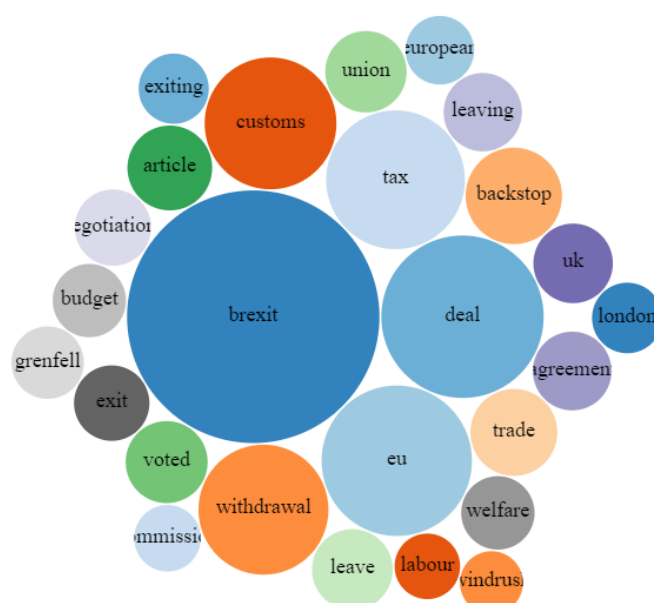
It might be unsurprising to find this bubble chart of keywords dominated by 'Brexit', but it could help to widen the investigation to consider examining some of the other keywords of this period, such as 'withdrawal' or 'deal'. Once these have been identified, they can be used as search terms using the Basic or Advanced Screens. Notice, also, that some apparently unrelated issues also appear in this period, such as 'windrush', a label derived from the S.S. Windrush – the liner used to bring immigrants to the UK from the Caribbean. Here, it refers to a scandal which erupted in 2018 over the forced deportation of citizens from Commonwealth countries even though they may have lived in the UK for many decades. Another inclusion here, apparently unrelated to Brexit, is 'Grenfell', the name of the tower block which went on fire on June 14th 2017, due to unsafe cladding, killing many (72) of its residents and injuring others. Whilst these examples illustrate the fact that keywords will often include the accidental, i.e. words relating to historical events which just happen to

occur in the period being investigated, there is nevertheless a significance in the fact that these two events pushed through the overwhelming focus on 'Brexit' during this period to make into the keyword list.

If we compare these two periods in reverse, we find a very different picture. Though the period from January 2015 to the referendum shows a small hint of what's to come in the presence of 'Greek' and 'Greece' here (Greece was thought to be on the 'Grexit' path before the UK's 'Brexit'), there is a much wider range of topics here, including the problems of radicalism in Islam ('ISIL' and 'Daesh'), the war in Syria, trade deal negotiations (TTIP), a crisis in the steel industry ('steel', Tata), issues of power generation ('oil', 'wind', 'onshore'), the doctors' dispute ('bma', 'junior', 'doctors'), public transport ('tfl'), controversy over schooling ('academies'), debates over the balance of power between Westminster and the other parliaments of the UK ('devolution') as well as the normal business of government represented by 'fiscal' and 'deficit':
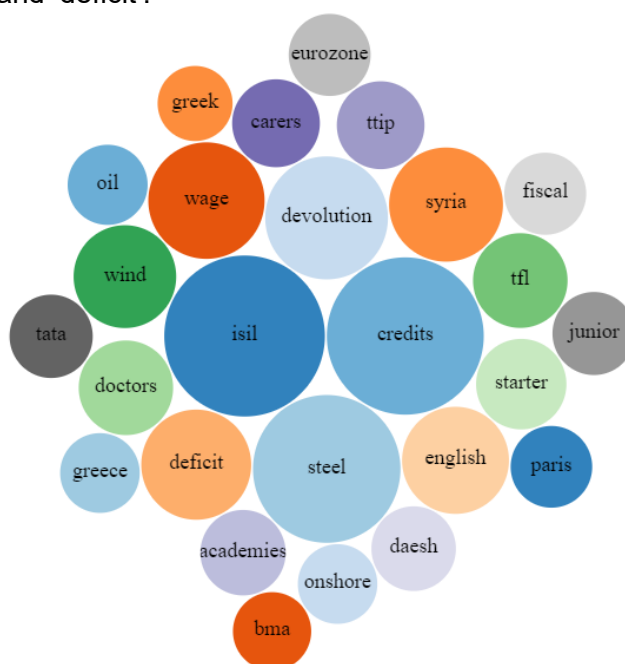
The analyst might be able to work out the relevance of the keywords if they have knowledge of the history and events of the time, but it is also easy to check this by clicking on a word and calling up the contributions which include that word. In the case of this bubble chart, if you are not certain that you are recalling events correctly, you could, for example, click on 'Paris' to check whether it was indeed the terrorist attacks that have cause that word to be included in the keywords:

Date	Member	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
2016-06-15	Mike Freer	Since the terrorist attacks in	**Paris**	and Brussels, many of my constituents are worried that remaining
2016-06-15	Mark Pritchard	involved in the awful and egregious attacks in Brussels and	**Paris**	were EU citizens. It is completely misleading to suggest that
2016-06-15	Mark Hendrick	tables in places such as Brussels, Strasbourg, London, Berlin and	**Paris;**	not by bloody wars on European soil as they were

This case study is not meant to be a rigorous research project, but an opportunity to see how one might use the HaH website in researching the language and/or the events of history that are covered by Hansard, the official record of the UK parliament.