Jan Kochanowski University Press

This is a contribution from *Token*: *A Journal of English Linguistics*
Volume 12/2021.
Edited by John G. Newman, Marina Dossena and Sylwester Łodej.
Special Editor for volume 12: Christina Samson.

From "British Subjects" to "American People": Transformation of national identities in a corpus of American newspapers (1764-1783)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the way in which the British colonists of North America frame their national identity in the socio-political and judicial debates which are voiced in the press in the period before and after the Declaration of Independence. To this purpose, I constructed a corpus of newspaper articles from 1764 to 1783 and I analysed the most frequent descriptors used by authors to encode their national identity in discourse, focusing on recurrent collocational and colligational patterns. Results show that colonists adopt discourse strategies of assimilation, perpetuation and dismantling across the two decades. If until the mid-1770s they enhance their sameness with native Britons on the basis of their common cultural inheritance and historical memory, after 1776 colonists seek to construct an autochthonous American nationality. Although they appear to be neither able nor willing to see themselves as dis-membered from the British Empire, the years of the Revolution set the premises for the development of a post-British national identity.

Keywords: social transformation, national identities, American newspapers, American Revolution, corpus linguistics.

1. Introduction

The American Revolution prompted the construction of a new national identity outside the British Empire. The process was slow and strenuous as the colonists of the 1760s were neither prepared nor willing to abandon their British identity. Until the Revolution, European Americans cherished

DOI: 10.25951/4845

and cultivated their Britishness by proudly replicating the socio-economic relations and legal culture of their mother-land. As Greene points out: "for the colonists before 1775 a positive sense of identity was dependent upon their ability to identify themselves as 'free Englishmen', inheriting the liberties, rights and culture of all the British subjects" (Greene 1992: 301). When the monarchical authority began to levy taxes and deprive the inhabitants of their natural rights as English freemen, the reaction was justified as a legitimate attempt to protect time-honoured British freedoms. Even when Independence was finally accomplished, the consciousness of an American national identity seemed to be difficult to awaken in the population. If on the one hand, the voice of the Patriots celebrated the construction of a free, happy and prosperous nation in the press, on the other hand, Loyalists, representing about one third of the population, refused to think of themselves as dis-membered from their mother-land.

Print culture provides valuable testimony of the opposing representations of national identity which characterised the period before and after the Revolution. In particular, newspapers, thanks to their periodicity, were instrumental in structuring, replicating and transforming the national and political consciousness of the colonists, by voicing discourses and counter-discourses about their traditional rights to Britishness on the one hand, and their growing sense of Americanness on the other.

My aim in this article is to examine the linguistic strategies through which this progressive shift of nationhood, from British subjects into post-British Americans, is constructed and negotiated in discourse. To this purpose, I compiled a corpus of American newspapers published from 1764 to 1783 and covering the period from the Stamp Act to the Treaty of Paris, marking the end of the American Revolution and sanctioning the new nation's complete separation from the British Empire. The time span of 19 years is subdivided into three periods in order to track the diachronic evolution of the colonists' national consciousness. Specifically, I shall analyse the most frequent descriptors referring to people and geographical territories in terms of collocations and concordances.[1] The emergence of lexico-syntactic patterns will enable us to trace the mutual relationship existing between the socio-cultural attitudes conveyed by recurrent linguistic choices and the

[1] Words referring to geographical territories are selected for analysis since space is an intrinsic part of any definition of national identity. Indeed, national identity cannot really be conceived without the presence of a nationalist territorial ideology (Kaplan – Guntram 2011).

socio-political and cultural contingencies of a very turbulent period in the history of the British Empire.

Previous studies on the emergence of an American national identity in the press were conducted by, amongst others, Merritt (1965) and Ziegler (2006), who carried out a quantitative analysis of place-name symbols and reference terms in a selection of colonial newspapers of the time, focusing on the period 1735-1775 and 1750-1800, respectively. In this sense, my research can be placed within the tradition of historical news discourse studies and contribute to the historiographical debate over the origins of American nationalism (Trautsch 2016).[2]

2. Theoretical framework

According to Hall (1996), national identity is a cultural and discursive construct which originates from a system of cultural representations that allows people to interpret and feel part of a nation intended as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1988). This sense of in-group membership derives both from a shared culture and a common history – the latter defined as "collective memory" – which consists in a selective recollection of past events which are considered important for a specific community of people (Halbwachs 1985). The notion of collective memory is crucial to an analysis of the discursive construction of a nation, as it shows what aspects, events and social actors are selected from the archive of historical memory in order to identify a common origin and create continuity between past and present.

Within their Discourse Historical Approach, De Cillia et al. (1999) and Wodak et al. (2009) draw upon the works of Anderson (1988), Hall (1996) and Halbwachs (1985), amongst others, to elaborate their framework of national identity addressing the role of collective narrative, time and discourse. They argue that:

> The discursive construction of national identity resolves around the three temporal axes of the past, the present and the future. In this context, origin, continuity/tradition, transformation, timelessness and anticipation are important ordering criteria. Spatial, territorial

[2] Following Trautsch (2016: 291) I adopt a broad definition of nationalism as "the ideology which creates, legitimizes, mobilizes and integrates the nation, promotes the unity of the national people and demands a sovereign state for this nation".

> and local dimensions […] are likewise significant in this discursive construction of national identity. (Wodak et al. 2009: 26)

To complete their framework De Cillia et al. (1999) and Wodak et al. (2009) conceive of national identities not only as discursive constructions but also as mental structures which influence – and are in turn influenced by – social practices and find their actualization in discourse. In this regard, they draw upon Bourdieu's notion of national identity as a sort of *habitus*, that is to say a complex of common ideas, concepts or perception schemas of related emotional attitudes, of similar behavioural dispositions all of which are internalized through national socialization (De Cillia et al. 1999: 153).

In my analysis, I shall adopt the Discourse Historical Approach theorized by Reisigl – Wodak (2009) and Wodak (2013) in order to examine the changing discursive representation of the colonies and their inhabitants in the press. Within this theoretical framework, the historical background in which national identities are discursively constructed is of paramount importance, in order to account for the authors' socio-political and ideological attitudes actualized in their lexical choices. What is more, the model allows the analyst to explore the way in which particular discourse representations may change diachronically, thus contributing to the identification of divergent identity narratives over the years. The mutual relationship existing between text and the socio-political and historical context of its production will be investigated through the aid of corpus linguistics.

Following the principles of CADS (Partington 2004, 2009; Lombardo 2009), I shall take the quantitative evidence of linguistic patterns in the corpus as a point of departure and I shall move to the identification of the discourse strategies adopted by news-writers in order to shape and mould their national identity in terms of Britishness or Americanness in connection with the specific historical contingency. In order to tackle aspects of discourse continuity and change throughout the decades, the corpus will be divided into three sub-corpora. The most frequent descriptors for people and nations will be examined in terms of collocations and concordances and – where possible – will be grouped within the following four macro-strategies identified by De Cillia et al. (1999) as being at the basis of the discursive construction of a national identity:

1) the constructive strategy which includes all those linguistic devices which help invite identification and solidarity with the we-group, at the same time expressing distancing from "others";

2) perpetuation and justification strategies which reproduce, support and protect a threatened national identity by justifying the status-quo through the use of collective memory of the past;
3) transformation strategies which are used to transform the meaning of well-established aspects of national identity to another;
4) dismantling or destructive strategies which are used to demolish existing national identities or elements of them.

3. Corpus and methodology

In my study of nomination strategies in American newspapers (1764-1783) I have made use of the online news archive *America's Historical Newspapers*, which includes the *Early American Newspapers Series* from 1690 to 1922 as one of its major sources. The archive features searchable full text and page images of newspapers recounting people and events which shaped the American nation. I selected 110 news texts which specifically dealt with the relationship between the American colonies and Britain from the Stamp Act to the Treaty of Paris and I built a machine-readable corpus of about 101,000 words.

The corpus contains newspapers which conveyed the perspective of Patriots as well as newspapers which were sympathetic to the viewpoint of Loyalists. In particular, 12 newspapers promoted the Patriot cause, and 12 newspapers supported the Tory cause (Davidson 1941; Barnes 1974; Potter – Calhoon 1980; Parkinson 2015).[3] My dataset comprises four major text-types reported in order of frequency: 43% letters (including extracts

[3] The revolutionary newspapers are the following ones: *The Boston Gazette* (1719-98), *The Boston Gazette, or, Country Journal* (1755-93), *The Pennsylvania Chronicle* (1767-74), *The Connecticut Courant* (1764-74), *The Essex Gazette* (1768-75) *The Massachusetts Spy* (1770-72), *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* (1771-1783), *The New England Chronicle or the Essex Gazette* (1775-76), *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser* (1776-87), *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser* (1776-1801), *The New Jersey Gazette* (1777-1786), *The Freeman's Journal or the North American Intelligencer* (1781-92). The loyalist newspapers are *The Massachusetts Gazette* (1765-66, 1768-69), *The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser* (1763-69), *The Boston Chronicle* (1767-70), *The Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Weekly Newsletter* (1704-76), *The Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Newsletter* (1763-65), *The Massachusetts Gazette and the Boston Post-Boy Advertiser* (1769-75), *The New York Gazette and the Weekly Mercury* (1768-83), *The Pennsylvania Evening Post* (1775-81), *The Royal Pennsylvania Gazette* (1778-78), *The Royal Gazette* (1777-83), *The Norwich Packet and the Weekly Advertiser* (1779-1782), and *The Salem Gazette* (1781-85). *The Boston Evening Post* (1735-1775) is considered more objective by presenting both sides of the controversy (Volo 2012: 150).

from epistolary correspondence and opinion articles in the form of letters to the printer and letters to readers), 30% official documents (i.e. resolutions, petitions, declarations), 24% news reports and 3% essays. In order to carry out a diachronic investigation of nomination strategies throughout the two decades, the corpus has been divided into three sub-corpora of about 33,000 words each, corresponding to three different periods. Period 1 covers the years from 1764 to 1770 and contains 46% letters, 36% news reports and 17% official documents. Period 2 comprises the time span from 1771 to 1776 and is composed of 46% letters, 35% official documents and 19% news reports. Period 3 stretches from 1777 to 1783 and features 43% news reports and 35% letters, 13% official documents and 8% essays.

My database was queried with the aid of the text analysis software *Sketch Engine*.[4] In order to single out recurrent lexico-syntactic patterns of language use and relate them to their historical contextual factors, I worked out a wordlist for each sub-corpus, from which I selected the most frequent descriptors of place and people by adopting the threshold of 20 occurrences per sub-corpus as a criterion for obtaining sufficient evidence for a quantitative analysis. For each noun, I examined its collocational and colligational behaviour in concordances through the word-sketch function offered by Sketch Engine. This tool provides a snapshot of the grammatical and collocational set in which the noun occurs and displays results in the form of grammatical relations. The results obtained from each of the three periods were compared quantitively and qualitatively, in order to identify similarities and differences in the nomination strategies and trace their diachronic evolution in the representation of a post-British, American identity.

4. Analysis

In Table 1, I report the most frequent descriptors of people and place and their distribution over the three periods.

Period 1 is characterised by a series of tax acts which the British crown imposed on the colonies. Despite their growing indignation, colonists still felt they were part of the British Empire and the descriptors represent empire-minded people who tried hard to preserve their British cultural heritage. In period 2 the major variation consists in the replacement of the

[4] For further information on the corpus tool, see Sketch Engine at https://app.sketchengine.eu/

top word *colonies* with *America*, indicating a growing sense of territorial and geographical unity. At the same time, the descriptor *Americans* records the same frequency as *subjects*, thus marking the emergence of a new and revolutionary sense of in-group membership as rightful owners of the American continent, separated from Britain. Period 3 documents the discursive construction of an autochthonous national identity as we can see from the top word *States,* mostly occurring in the multi-word unit *United States*. The political and diplomatic union among the ex-provinces, however, was still disjointed by a real sense of national consciousness, and the word *Tories*, referring to those who remained loyal to their Britishness, is evidence of the identity crisis of those years.

Table 1. Quantitative distribution of descriptors across the three sub-corpora

PERIOD 1 (1764-1770)	F	PERIOD 2 (1771-1776)	F	PERIOD 3 (1777-1783)	F
COLONIES	86	AMERICA	114	STATES	141
COUNTRY	81	COLONIES	91	AMERICA	95
PEOPLE	79	PEOPLE	83	COUNTRY	83
BRITAIN	61	COUNTRY	73	BRITAIN	66
AMERICA	42	BRITAIN	67	PEOPLE	41
INHABITANTS	41	INHABITANTS	41	TORIES	29
SUBJECTS	37	SUBJECTS	27	NATION	25
		AMERICANS	27		

4.1 Period 1 (1764-1770): Striving for Britishness

The most frequent descriptor in period one is *colonies* in the plural. The word occurs within three major collocational patterns: *these colonies* (28),[5] *other colonies* (8) and *British colonies* (6). The collocation *these colonies* is usually introduced by the preposition *in/of* in the lexico-syntactic constructions *the people/inhabitants of these colonies* (4) or *his Majesty's (liege)/British subject(s) in these colonies* (4). The two patterns are mostly found in official documents and letters, as examples (1) and (2) show. In both cases the nomination appears to be overlexicalized, as happens every time we have to deal with a problematic aspect of a culture which requires the creation and use of many words for a single entity or concept (Fowler 1991: 85). In period 1, there is no one

[5] From this point in the article, the number of occurrences of words/patterns in the corpus will be given in brackets.

single word used to define the colonists' nationhood, which is why authors resort to descriptive patterns combining *people/inhabitants/subjects* with their geographical territory and their cultural heritage. The lexical preference for the word *colonies* in the plural instead of *America* is indicative of the colonists' endorsement of the British Imperial ideology and subsumes their adherence to the principle that loyalty to their colony means loyalty to the Empire. Even so, while example (1) features the use of perpetuation strategies by referring to the bond of allegiance and subordination of the colonies to Britain, example (2) challenges the justice of the British parliamentary procedures and initiates the transformation of Britain from a generous and valuable mother-land to a greedy and unjust centralized imperial authority.

(1) The following is said to be a copy of the RESOLUTIONS of the CONGRESS held at NEW-YORK. Saturday, October 19, 1765. RESOLVED, That **his Majesty's subjects in these colonies**, owe the same allegiance to the crown of Great-Britain, that is owing from his subjects born within the realm, and all due subordination to that august body of the parliament. (*Massachusetts Gazette*, 20 March 1766, official document)

(2) The place of paying the duties, imposed by the late act, appears to me therefore to be totally immaterial. The single question is, whether the parliament can legally impose duties to be paid by **the people of these colonies** only for the sole purpose of raising a revenue, on commodities which **she obliges us to take from her alone**? (*Supplement to the Boston Chronicle,* 21 December 1767, letter)

The second most frequent collocation is *other colonies*. The cluster uncovers the colonists' perception of the fragmentation and differentiation which still characterised the provinces of America. Examples (3) and (4), however, show the use of assimilation strategies which discursively constructs the colonies' common interest in opposing an unlawful taxation policy and in preserving an inherited *status quo*. If up to that time colonists felt united as British freemen under his Majesty's authority, from the mid-1760s a new sense of horizontal, inter-colonial affinity began to take shape, as shown by the collocates *with us*, *all*, *mutual*, *each other*. This affinity was far from being revolutionary and progressive in intent. It was closer to an *English* form of resistance endorsed by the Assemblies against reformist innovations originating from London (Chet 2019: 7). As Wahrman points out, contrary to

other wars in recent memory, the American War cannot easily be conceived of in terms of a polarization between *us* vs *them* based on stable criteria of sameness and difference. Indeed, the lack of clarity about who the British were, either enemies or brethren, makes it hard for the colonists of either side to cast them within univocal identity categories (Wahrman 2001: 1238):

(3) As his Majesty's **other Northern American colonies** are embark'd with us in this most important bottom, we further desire you to use your endeavours, that their weight may be added to that of this province: that by the united application of all who are aggrieved, all may happily obtain redress. (*Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Newsletter,* 28 May 1764, official document)

(4) For the cause of one is the cause of all. If the parliament may lawfully deprive New York of any of its rights, it may deprive any, or **all the other colonies** of their rights; and nothing can possibly so much encourage such attempts, as a mutual in-attention to the interest of each other. (*Boston Chronicle*, 21 December 1767, letter)

The second descriptor in the wordlist is *country* which is mostly found in the pattern *mother country* (12) and *(our) own country* (6) in official documents and letters as in examples (5) and (6). The two clusters correspond to the overlapping processes of Anglicization and Americanization characterising the colonists' discursive construction of their national identity. By Anglicization, historians refer to the post-Glorious Revolution British identity which the royal colonies of the 18th century embraced and actualised in political, socio-cultural and economic practices in an attempt to replicate the British culture, society and legislation in the continent (Greene 1992; Murrin 2018; Chet 2019). By Americanization, on the other hand, they indicate that process of inevitable acclimatization with the peculiar conditions of the country, from the easy availability of land and exploitable resources to the incorporation in the broad Atlantic trading system which stimulated high levels of individual activity and expansiveness (Greene 1992; Conforti 2001). In period 1, the reiteration of *mother country* is consistent with the Anglicization process as it encodes a metaphorical child-parent relationship between the colonists and their home land, on which basis they discursively construct their national identity as free born and dutiful children of Great Britain:

(5) We have evinced our Loyalty to our King, our Affection to the British Government and **our Mother Country**, on all Occasions, by an uncommon readiness to assist in any Measures with our Blood and Treasure to extend their Conquests, and to enlarge those Dominions, from which the reap so many and great advantages. (*The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser*, 4 November 1765, official document)

At the same time, however, the pattern is also used within a counter-discourse which uncovers British abuses and anticipates a clash of interests between the mother-land and its colonies, as we can see in example (6):

(6) And while the colonists are indulged or encouraged in trade, they never will think of going upon manufactories themselves, the only thing **the mother country** has to fear from them and which must now very soon be the case or they must learn to go without clothes (a very hard matter in this climate) every branch by which they could make remittance for them being stopped. (*Boston Evening Post*, 2 January 1764, letter)

The tension between assertions of sameness and difference destabilizes well-demarcated superimposition of identity categories, thus determining continuous shifts along the sameness-difference dyad (Wahrman 2001: 1241).

The cluster *our/your own country* is usually found in the pattern [produce] + *of* + [possessive adj.] + *country* and can be construed as part of a tendency towards Americanization. As Merritt noticed, at the time "the perception of the land as being a part of the American rather than British community precedes a similar perception of the inhabitants of that land" (Merritt 1965: 333). Evidence suggests that the gradual construction of an American national identity starts with the description of the land as American and only later does it encode its inhabitants as Americans (see Period 2). The lexico-syntactic pattern suggests how the independence of a nation is determined by its internal economic growth, as shown in example (7):

(7) Thus my countrymen, by consuming less of what we are not really in want of, and by industriously cultivating and improving **the natural advantages of our own country**, we might save our substance even our lands, from becoming the property of others […] (*The Boston Post Boy and Advertiser*, 16 November 1767, letter)

Again, it is worth bearing in mind that in the 1760s, the colonists' appeal to labour and consumption of American products is not to be intended as an annihilation of their Britishness but rather as a way to secure their rights and privileges as English freemen inside the political and cultural framework of the British Empire.

The third most frequent descriptor is *people*, often occurring in the pattern *people of* + [geographical place] (14). The cluster *people of these colonies/ this colony/province* (7) coexists with *people of England/Great Britain* (6) in order to emphasise continuity and in-group membership between the two parts of the Empire, as example (8) shows. In this regard, the pervasive appeal to historical memory is part of those perpetuation strategies which are meant to defend and preserve the colonists' national identity as British freemen.

(8) Resolved, That the First Adventurers, Settlers of this his Majesty's Colony and Dominions of Virginia, brought with them and transmitted to their Posterity, and all other his Majesty's Subjects since, inhabiting in this his Majesty's Colony, all the Privileges and Immunities that have at any Time been held, enjoyed and possessed by **the People of Great-Britain**. (*The Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, 24 June 1765, official document)

If on the one hand, assimilation and perpetuation strategies are adopted in the hope of persuading Britain to abide by the Charter and treat the colonists as equals, on the other hand, dissimilation strategies are put in place in order to prompt a proto-national sense of inter-colonial unity (of interests in misfortune), as we can see in the polarization between *we/the people of these colonies* vs *she (the mother-country)/they* in examples (9) and (10):

(9) The single question is, whether the parliament can legally impose duties to be paid by **the people of these colonies** only for the sole purpose of raising a revenue, on commodities which **she** obliges us to take from **her** alone? Or, in other words, whether the parliament can legally take money out of our pockets without our consent? (*Supplement to the Boston Chronicle*, 21 December 1767, letter)

(10) Nor can **we** think that any Calamity or Misery which may befall **this distressed People**, ought to be imputed to our refusing to part with our just Rights and Liberties. Moreover, we detest **their** principle who say, let us do Evil that Good may come, and are offended and grieved

at the Violence and Robberies lately committed. (*The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser*, 4 November 1765, official document)

Dissimilation strategies document the beginning of a very primitive narrative of intercolonial solidarity which is carried out through negative other-presentation, i.e. by representing the British Parliament as acting against the law and through positive self-presentation, i.e. by replicating the paradigm of the colonists as dutiful but vexed subjects of Great Britain. It is worth pointing out that at that time colonists still hoped to have their grievances redressed by the king, and they were probably unaware that their polemical discourse would set the basis for the construction of a future national identity separated from Great Britain.

In light of the on-going dispute with the British government, it is no surprise that the descriptor *(Great) Britain* is more frequent than *America* especially in official documents. Faced with the threat of losing their British rights, colonists use all possible rhetorical strategies to re-state their sameness with their fellow countrymen in Britain through association in the form of relationyms and origonyms such as *our fellow subjects* (4), *sons* (5) and *descent* (Reisigl – Wodak 2001: 51-52):

(11) At the same time we reflect on our happiness in having a natural and constitutional Right to all the Privileges of **our Fellow Subjects in Great Britain**, we behold with Pain and Horror, any Attempts to deprive us of them, and can not but look on such Attempts as Instances of the greatest Unkindness and Unjustice. (*The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser*, 4 November 1765, official document)

(12) We own **our descent** from thee – we glory in being **the sons of Britannia**. We glory in the Birth Right of Englishmen – we claim no more (*The Boston Chronicle*, 29 August 1768, letter)

The next descriptor, *America*, occupies the fifth position in the wordlist, suggesting that its acknowledgement as a geographical single entity is relevant but not predominant yet. The term was originally used by the British during the intercolonial wars for treating the continental colonies as a unit (Greene 1992). The descriptor is mostly found in letters (52%), whereas official documents contain only 15% of the occurrences, suggesting that freeholders in legal assemblies still privileged the word *colonies* over the notion of a geographical entity detached from the mother-land. Although

the lower frequency of *America* in period 1 reveals that colonists did not feel fully confident with it, its usage is nonetheless consistent with an emerging tendency to find unity in the geographical territory inhabited. The descriptor is mostly found in the pattern [NP] + *in* + *America* (22). In most cases, it collocates with *his Majesty's loyal subjects* (4) and *British dominions/plantations* (6) in line with the persistent colonial ideology, as example (13) shows.

(13) it flow'd from every tongue and pen and press, till it had diffused itself thro' every part of **the British dominions in America**; it united us all, we seem'd to be animated by one spirit, and that was a spirit of liberty. (*The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser*, 18 November 1765, letter)

There are also instances in which America is metonymically used to refer to its own people although always within a British colonial framework, as we can see in the collocation *British America* (5) in example (14):

(14) As soon as this shocking act was known, it fill'd **all British America**, from one End to the other, with astonishment and grief. (*The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser*, 18 November 1765, letter)

The last two descriptors which appear in the wordlist are *inhabitants* and *subjects*. The former is found in the pattern [*other*] *inhabitants* + *of* + [*colony/these colonies/town/city*] (19) and reveals the fragmented and pluralistic identity of the colonists in the vast American territory, as we can see in example (15):

(15) Gentlemen, Your being chosen by the Freeholders and Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, to represent them in the General Assembly the ensuing year, affords you the strongest testimony of that confidence which they place in your integrity and capacity. (*The Massachusetts Gazette,* 28 May 1764, letter)

The latter (*subjects*) represents the Anglicization of the continent where empire-minded people proudly acknowledge their constitutionally regulated subordination to the British crown. The most common collocates for *subjects* are *loyal* (9), *free/natural born* (6), *dutiful* (4) which reveal their "blood relation" with Great Britain, since their English forefathers colonized these territories (Cecconi 2020):

(16) it would carry a face of Injustice in it, to deny us any of the Liberties and Privileges contained therein [the Charter]; seeing that our Fathers had so dearly purchased them, which Charter affirms to us all the Privileges of **Natural Subjects**, **born within the Realm of England**. (*The Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser,* 4 November 1765, official document)

(17) THAT **his Majesty's liege subjects in these colonies**, are intituled to all the inherent rights and liberties of **his natural born subjects**, within the kingdom of Great-Britain (*Massachusetts Gazette*, 20 March 1766, official document)

The collocational patterns of period 1 show a predominance of perpetuation/justification strategies actualized in the recurrent reference to the bond of allegiance of the colonies to Britain and in the emphasis on the colonists as British freemen resident in America as part of the British Empire. Even so, instances of dissociation between the colonies and Britain begin to take shape, especially in letters, thus setting the premises for the discourse construction of an American national identity separated from the motherland.

4.2 Period 2 (1771-1776): From Britishness to Americanness

In period 2 the descriptor *America* makes a rapid rise and occupies the top position in the wordlist, reaching a peak in official documents (53%). Colonists foreground the unity of their geographical territory so as to construct a narrative of solidarity and communality which anticipates the creation of a new national identity. The word mostly occurs within two lexico-syntactic patterns [*British/His Majesty's colonies/plantations*] + *in* + *America* (32) and [NP] + *of* + *America* (30), both present in letters and official documents. The former is consistent with the Anglicization of the colonists as it simply indicates the territory where the British dominions lie, as in example (18):

(18) That whereas his Majesty GEORGE the Third is the rightful Successor to the Throne of Great-Britain, and justly entitled to the Allegiance of the British Realm, and agreeable to Com- pact, of **the English Colonies in America**. Therefore we the Heirs and Successors of the first Planters of this Colony, do chearfully acknowledge the said GEORGE the

Third to be our rightful Sovereign […] (*Supplement to the Massachusetts Gazette,* 15 September 1774, official document)

The latter, on the other hand, encodes the Americanization process, whereby the land is metonymically used to refer to its people and their rights, as can be seen in example (19).

(19) That the resolution lately come into by the East India company to send out their tea to America, subject to the payment of duties on its being landed here, is an open attempt to enforce the ministerial plan, and a violent attack upon **the liberties of America**. (*The Boston Gazette and Country Journal,* 29 November 1773, official document)

In the pattern *liberties of America* (7), the geographical territory is personified so as to assimilate all its people and construct sameness among them. At the same time, the metonymic choice of the term is meant to mitigate the challenging force of the polemical discourse by backgrounding the colonists' direct responsibility for accusing their mother-land of tyranny and for outlining the possibility of a separation from her.

The revolutionary force of this narrative overlaps with a more conservative discourse, where the resentment of the colonists is voiced within an empire-dependent framework. This trend is traceable in the recurrent collocation of *America and Britain* (10), where the two entities, though encoded as distinct – are conceived of as belonging together and as necessary to each other for the common welfare of the Empire. The lexicon of continuity – *restoring*, *preserving*, *remain* – is consistent with the perpetuation strategies adopted by the colonists to defend their Britishness as we can see in the following patriotic newspaper:

(20) Civil war, confusion, and destruction are inevitable, if administration continues to invade the rights of the Americans; and therefore our most serious and attentive consideration should be applied to the great affair of **restoring and preserving union and harmony between Britain and America**. (*Massachusetts Spy,* 30 June 1774, letter)

(21) The empire standing upon these great principles of equity and equality no just cause would ever exist for disunion between **Britain and America**; and the British dominions might upon this basis of

justice and liberty, extend further and further to the remotest regions of the earth; and **Britain remain the centre of union**, wealth and splendour. (*Massachusetts Spy*, 30 June 1774, letter)

The second most frequent descriptor is *colonies* which is consistent with the dominant Imperial ideology. The word is pre-modified by two semantic sets of adjectives which confirm the overlapping voices of Anglicization and Americanization characterising press debate. On the side of the Anglicization, we find occurrences of *loyal colonies* (2), *British colonies* (4) and *his Majesty's colonies* (4), mainly encoded in the letter text-type. On the side of Americanization, we find instances of *American colonies* (5), especially in letters, and *united colonies* (6) and *confederation/union of the colonies* (2) mostly found in official documents. The occurrences of *united colonies* date from 1775 though it is only one year later, in 1776, that they are capitalized as a new political body, as shown in the following passage:

(22) FORASMUCH as all the endeavours of **the United Colonies**, by the most decent representations and petitions to the King and Parliament of Great Britain, to restore peace and security to America under the British government, and a reunion with that people upon just and liberal terms, instead of redress of grievances, have produced, from an imperious and vindictive administration, increased insult, oppression and a vigorous attempt to effect our total destruction. (*The Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, 24 June 1776, official document)

Another interesting collocational pattern involves the words *colonies* and *Great Britain/Her* linked by the preposition *between* (7), as can be seen in examples (23) and (24):

(23) When the inhabitants of this extended continent observe that regular measures are prosecuted for **re-establishing harmony between Great Britain and these colonies**, their minds will grow more calm (*The Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, 11 July 1774, letter)

(24) We solemnly assure your Majesty, that we, not only most and ardently **desire the former Harmony between Her and these colonies,** may be restored, but that Concord may be established between them upon so firm a basis as to perpetuate its Blessings, uninterrupted by any future Dissentions to succeeding Generations in both Countries and to

transmit your Majesty's Name to Posterity. (*The New England Chronicle or the Essex Gazette*, 24 August 1775, official document)

The Britishness perpetuated and justified in these narratives extends to the year 1775, showing that the revolution was dictated by necessity. As stated at the Virginia Convention of August 1774, the revolution was undertaken for the purpose not of forming a new nation but rather of "securing the Peace and the Good Order of Government within the ancient colony" (Greene 1992, 2001).

The third most frequent collocate is *people* which is mostly found in letters (45%) and official documents (37%). It occurs in the syntactic patterns [NP] + *of* + *the people* (26) and *people* + *of* + [NP] (19). In the former pattern – along with words referring to the colonists' legal claims, mostly *liberties* (4), *rights* (3) and *representation* (2) – we find words showing people's awareness of their high number (*increase*, *measures*) as a socio-economic pre-condition for independence:

(25) This continent is more than a hundred times larger than Great Britain; and according to the present **increase of the people**, in less than a century they will exceed fifty millions. Can it be supposed that this vast people w ill be slaves and vassals of tyrants in Britain? (*Massachusetts Spy*, 30 June 1774, letter)

(26) Their numbers will be too small, in any manner whatever to control **the sentiments or measures of the people of America**. Their conduct never can prevent the exertions of these colonies in vindication of their liberty. (*The Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, 11 July 1774, letter)

As was the case in period 1, the construction *people of* in example (26) features a coexistence of assimilation and dissimilation between the people of America/this colony and the people of England/Great Britain. In this regard, the ideological stance of authors oscillates between a desperate hope for a reconciliation through the use of assimilation strategies such as *our Brethren in Great Britain* (Anglicization), as example 27 indicates, and the growing awareness of an irreconcilable gap between the two countries, in a polarized *we* vs *they* discourse (Americanization) characterised by negative other-presentation, as shown in example 28.

(27) Though the rulers there have had no compassion upon us, let us have compassion on the people of that kingdom: And if to give weight to our supplications and to obtain relief for our suffering brethren, it shall be judged necessary to lay ourselves under some restrictions with regard to our imports and exports, let it be done with tenderness so as to convince **our brethren in Great Britain** of the importance of a connection and harmony between them and us, and of the danger of driving us into despair. (*The Boston Gazette and Country Journal,* 11 July 1774, letter)

(28) **We** have seen **the people of Great Britain so lost to every sense of virtue and honor**, as to pass over the most pathetic and earnest appeals to **their** justice with an unfeeling indifference. – The hopes **we** placed on **their** exertions, have long since failed. (*The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, 10 June 1776, official document)

The next most frequent word is *country*. In period 2 the pattern *your/our country* (12) outnumbers *(our) mother/parent country* (10), showing an increasing tendency to consider America as a country of its own, especially in revolutionary newspapers. The Americanization at the basis of the constructive strategy in example (29) is compensated by the Anglicization traceable in example (30) where loyal colonists continue to conceive of their identity in terms of a parent-child bond with Britain, especially in petitions to the king. In both cases, the pervasive presence of the possessive adjective (*our/your*) is indicative of the importance ascribed to the sense of ownership of the land and membership of a community as proxies for the construction or perpetuation of a national identity.

(29) We are ready with our lives and interest to assist them in opposing these and all other measures tending **to enslave our country**. (*Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, 13 December 1773, official document)

(30) **The Union between our Mother Country and these Colonies**, and the Energy of mild and just Government, produced Benefits so remarkably important, and afforded such an Assurance of their permanency and increase, that the Wonder and Envy of other Nations were excited, while they beheld Great-Britain rising to a Power the most extraordinary the World had ever known. (*The New-England Chronicle or, The Essex Gazette*, 24 August 1775, official document)

The fifth word in the list is *Britain*, which mostly occurs in the pattern [NP] + *of* + *Britain,* as we can see in examples (31) and (32).

(31) The history of **the present king of Great Britain** is a history of unremitting injuries & usurpations, among which appears no solitary fact to contradict the uniform tenor of the rest, but all have in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. (*The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, 18 July 1776, official document)

(32) The Spirit of opposition to **the arbitrary and tyrannical acts of the Ministry and Parliament of Britain,** hath diffused itself so universally throughout this province, that the people, even to its most extended frontiers, are indefatigable in training themselves to military discipline (*The New England Chronicle or the Essex Gazette*, 15 June 1775, news report)

The NP slot is filled by lexemes referring to the governmental institutions and the king, especially in patriotic texts. This is dictated by the colonists' need to restrict the target of their blame, showing that the revolt was due to the contingencies of an unconstitutional government and a tyrannical king, rather than to any gratuitous spirit of rebellion against their own people.

While the next word *inhabitants* maintains the same frequency and collocational behaviour as in period 1, the word *subjects* registers a decrease which results from the appearance of the descriptor *Americans* among the most frequent words. The descriptor *subjects* continues to be used in official documents and letters, as can be seen in example (33).

(33) We yet entertain hopes of your uniting with us in the defence of our common Liberty, and there is yet reason to believe, that should we join in imploring the attention of our Sovereign to the unmerited and unparalleled oppressions of **his American Subjects**, he will at length be undeceived, and forbid a licentious Ministry any longer to riot in the ruins of the Rights of Mankind. (*The New-England Chronicle*, 22 June 1775, official documents)

The loyalist narrative of American subjects of the British Empire runs parallel to the patriotic representation of Americans living in a vast territory

and sharing conditions and interests which make them feel part of a new, distinct community, as shown in example (34).

(34) It might be demonstrated by a million of reasons that Britain cannot long rule **the Americans** by mere power, and hold them in servile subjection. This continent is more than a hundred times larger than Great Britain; and according to the present increase of the people, in less than a century they will exceed fifty millions. (*Massachusetts Spy*, 30 June 1774, letter)

The collocational patterns of Period 2 reveal an alternation of perpetuation strategies (Americans as British subjects) and constructive strategies based on both assimilation (sense of solidarity and common ground among Americans) and dissociation (America as different from Britain). Although the constructive strategies eventually win, leading to the secession in 1776, many Americans are still unwilling to rethink their nationhood in terms of a separation from Great Britain.

4.3 Period 3 (1777-1783): Identity challenge between Patriots and Loyalists

In period 3 the keyword *colonies* disappears in favour of *States* in the multi-word unit *United States* (77). After the Declaration of Independence, a new body politic comes into existence and is discursively constructed through a different naming system centred on the descriptors *United States* and *America*, which are predominant in official documents published in patriotic newspapers.

The existence of an American nationhood separated from the British Empire is expressed in numerous concordances where the word *United States* co-occurs with *His Majesty* (8), or *Britain* (7), both acting as independent participants in the negotiations. The national singularity of the United States is encoded in discourse by means of capitalization and by its equal footing with Britain and Europe, represented as *external* Others (Trautsch 2016: 303), as we can see in examples (35) and (36):

(35) Article 8th: The Navigation of the river Mississippi, from its source to the Ocean, shall forever remain free and open to **the Subjects of Great Britain** and **the Citizens of the United States**. (*Massachusetts Spy*, 27 January 1782, official document)

(36) All our treaties, whether of alliance, peace, or commerce, are formed under the sovereignty of the **United States**, and **Europe** knows us by no other name or title. The division of the empire into states is for our own convenience, but abroad this distinction ceases. (*Pennsylvania Packet,* 19 April 1783, essay)

The descriptor *United States* also reveals a semantic preference for words such as *nation(al)* (8), *independence* (7), *sovereignty* (6) and *citizen/ship* (4) which are meant to construct a new national identity in patriotic letters and essays, as shown in the following examples:

(37) **Citizens** of **America**, the severe conflict to which the Divine Providence hath called the **United States** requires the exercise of all virtuous and heroic principles. (*Norwich Packet,* [from the *Boston Gazette*] 21 September 1780, letter)

(38) In short, we have no other **national sovereignty** than as **United States**. It would even be fatal for us if we had – too expensive to be maintained and impossible to be supported. (*Pennsylvania Packet*, 19 April 1783, essay)

(39) There are four things which I humbly conceive are essential to the well-being, I may even venture to say, to the existence of the **United States** as an **Independent Power** […] These are the pillars on which the glorious Fabric of our **Independence** and **National** Character must be supported. (*Connecticut Courant*, 9 September 1783, letter)

The emphasis on the *united* character of the states was of paramount importance at a time when the ex-colonies were still marked off from one another and reluctant to overcome their local differences. In this sense, the rhetorical focus on the union was meant to disguise and compensate for the heterogeneity of the 13 States. It is worth pointing out that in almost half of its occurrences (64 out of 141) the word *States* is either unpremodified or preceded by adjectives and determiners such as *several, different*, *particular*, *individual*, *each, other* which attest the fragmentation of the new body politic, as example (40) indicates:

(40) More effectually to demonstrate our good intentions, we [the President and some members of the Congress] think proper to declare

> […] that we are disposed to […] perpetuate our union, by a reciprocal deputation of an agent or agents from **the different states**, who shall have the privilege of a seat and voice in the parliament of Great Britain; or, if sent from Britain, to have in that case a seat and voice in the assemblies of the **different states** to which they may be deputed respectively, in order to attend to the several interests of those by whom they are deputed. (*Pennsylvania Packet*, 4 July 1778, letter)

Patriotic essays warn against the individuality of the states as damaging to the international power and authority of the newly born nation, as we can see in example (41):

(41) **Individuals or individual states** may call themselves what they please; but the world, and especially the world of enemies, is not to be held in awe by the whistling of a name. Sovereignty must have power to protect all the parts that compose and constitute it: and as UNITED STATES we are equal to the importance of the title, but otherwise we are not. (*Pennsylvania Packet*, 19 April, 1783, essay)

America (95) is the second most frequent word in period 3. It defines the nation geographically rather than politically and mostly occurs in the lexico-syntactic pattern [NP] + *of* + *America*. There are 16 occurrences of *United States of America* followed by *citizens/people of America* (8). The last pattern is particularly significant when compared to the pattern *loyalists in America/ this country* (6). Whereas Patriots present themselves as citizens/people belonging to America as a new body politic, as shown in example (42), Loyalists construct their identity as resident in America but not as part of the emerging national community, as indicated in example (43).

(42) **The Citizens of America**, placed in the most enviable condition as the sole Lords and Proprietors of a vast Tract of Continent comprehending all the various soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniences of life, are now by the late satisfactory pacification acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and Independence. (*Connecticut Courant*, 9 September 1783, letter)

(43) On the contrary, the services of the loyalists have in all cases been ready and voluntary and in many unsolicited and in some unnoticed if not rejected. If it should be said, if such is the number and disposition of the **loyalists in America**, how comes it to pass that they have not been

of more importance to his Majesty's service? (*Salem Gazette*, 25 July 1782, official document)

The descriptor *country* (83) comes third in order of frequency. It is mostly found in patriotic letters which aim at eliciting a nationalistic spirit among the readers. It consistently occurs in the pattern [NP] + *of* + [possessive adjective] + *country* (34) with a semantic preference for the words *laws* (4) and *happiness* (4), whereas m*other-country* which was predominant in period 1 and 2 has completely disappeared from the narratives, as the following examples reveal:

(44) We have of late been so engaged to purchase British goods that we have dared to violate **the laws of our country** and have robbed the State of more than one half of its circulating medium. (*Massachusetts Spy*, 27 January 1782, letter)

(45) The real patriot feels pleasure arising from **the happiness of his country** and the welfare of others; the generous wish brings delight and the benevolent heart has a reward for all its particular desires. (*Norwich Packet* [from the *Boston Gazette*], 21 September 1780, letter)

The next descriptors *Britain* and *people* show a collocational behaviour similar to the one found in period 2, with *Britain* mostly occurring in the pattern *king/crown of Great Britain* (13) and *people* in the cluster *people of the (United) States/America* (11). It is worth pointing out that in patriotic letters to the printer/readers both the expression *our/his country* and *the people of (United) States/America* entail a paradigm of exclusion by which Loyalists are denied American *citizenship.* Only through this process of exclusion – camouflaged under the deliberately promiscuous choice of the indefinite term *the people* – did Patriots manage to create the myth of an American nation founded upon consent, or in Bradburn's words, *a myth of unanimity* (Bradburn 2009: 57-58).

The word *nation* (34) is a new entry in the list and stands out for its ground-breaking force within the pre-existing ideological framework of the Empire. In loyalist newspapers (especially in petitions to the king), the word is still used to refer to Great Britain as the only recognized nation to which the Americans feel they belong, as we can see in example (46), whereas in patriotic letters the word exhibits a conscious understanding of the citizens'

service to the Nation as an essential precondition for the establishment of their American identity and happiness, as shown in example (47).

(46) Surely, whole brigades throwing away their arms and returning home and all that sort of conduct must carry with it the most presumptive evidence not only of their dissatisfaction to the measures of Congress, but of **their loyalty and attachment to his Majesty, and the British nation and government**. (*Salem Gazette*, 25 July 1782, official document)

(47) At this auspicious period, **the United States came into existence as a Nation**, and if their Citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own. This is the moment when the eyes of the whole World are turned upon them. This is the moment to establish or ruin their national Character forever. (*Connecticut Courant*, 9 September 1783, letter)

The last word in the list is *Tories* (29) which – along with *loyalists* (19) – attests the English residues of the post-British national identity. The derogatory word used by Patriots to refer to those Americans who still recognize themselves as British features a strong negative semantic prosody which aims at dismantling/demolishing the legitimacy of their Britishness. Its usage in revolutionary newspapers reveals to what extent the post-British phase continues to be marked by an identity crisis which makes it hard for the nation to acquire a full consciousness of its singularity and independence, as indicated in examples (48) and (49).

(48) Awake Americans **to a sense of your danger**. No time is to be lost. Instantly **banish every Tory** from among you. Let these walls, let America be sacred alone to freemen. Drive far from you **every baneful wretch** who wishes to see you fettered with the chains of tyranny. (*Pennsylvania Packet*, 5 August 1779, letter)

(49) It is said that many of the **most zealous tories in New York** have packed up their effects in order to be ready at the shortest notice to see **the justly incensed vengeance** of those who have forsaken their habitations and have espoused and supported the cause of freedom, **in defiant of the most strenuous efforts of the tyrant**. (*The Freeman's Journal*, 29 January 1783, news report)

The collocational patterns of Period 3 exhibit a predominance of constructive strategies – often combined with dismantling ones – used by Patriots to promote the development of a conscious American identity. After the Declaration of Independence, perpetuation strategies lose their ground and their usage is confined to petitions to the king or complaining opinion articles in loyalist newspapers.

5. Conclusion

The discursive construction of an American national identity had to come to terms with the *habitus* of people who shared the same cultural background and collective memory of the native subjects of Great Britain. This determined an identity crisis which characterised the period before and after the Declaration of Independence (1764-1783). Even during the great disruption of the decade 1765-1775 the colonial élite continued to be confident they had more in common with a transatlantic community of polite, commercial, imperial British middle class and gentry than they had with their fellow colonials lower in the social order (Greene 2001; Murrin 2018). In period 1 (1764-1770) this mental structure is confirmed by a predominance of assimilation strategies which are meant to reinforce Americans' claim to Britishness through nomination patterns such as *Majesty's/British subjects in these colonies*, *our mother-country*, *British dominions in America*, *British America* and *sons of Britannia*.

In period 2 (1771-1776) – when the dispute with Britain escalated into open conflict – the Britishness of the colonists continued to be expressed in narratives where perpetuation and justification strategies highlighted continuity with the past, in order to defend an endangered national identity from the outrageous abuses of the mother-land. The lexicon of continuity, traceable in expressions such as *restoring and preserving union and harmony between Britain and America*, merges with patterns such as *liberties/rights of the people/America*, in order to justify the colonists' military action in response to being deprived of those rights to which they are entitled according to the Constitution. It is in period 2 that the Anglicization which sets the tone of more conservative narratives overlaps with counter-discourses of Americanization which – although already present in period 1 – gain momentum in press debate after the Boston Massacre of 1770. In patriotic narratives, assimilation and dissimilation strategies are deployed to construct a horizontal, inter-colonial sameness and communality against the tyranny of Britain, represented as the opposing *other*. In this sense, it may be argued that while Britishness originates from a common culture,

American nationalism derives from a common interest which functions as a pre-condition for the full recognition of a common *habitus*.

Period 3 (1777-1783) – covering the last phase of the American Revolution – sees the predominance of revolutionary narratives which deploy constructive strategies to shape a new national identity outside the Empire. Along with assimilation strategies which are instrumental in constructing in-group membership among ex-colonies still bound to local interests, a new lexicon emerges with descriptors such as *United States, nation* and *citizens of America*. Various shifts in the naming system take place as part of dismantling strategies which are meant to demolish the pre-existing British identity, in order to frame a proto-American national character. The fact that cultural resistance to Americanness continued to be strong among the people is documented by descriptors such as *Tories* and *loyalists* which represented the residues of a powerful British cultural heritage. By and large, the corpus-assisted discourse analysis confirms Zuckerman's claim (1989) that although the colonists were unprepared to see themselves as a people with a cultural identity of their own, their colonial experience as British Americans was so particular that the emergence of an independent (proto) national identity was almost inevitable.

The present corpus-assisted discourse study places the origins of American nationalism in the period of the American Revolution and since "nation-formation is a process and not an occurrence or event" (Connor 1990: 99; Trautsch 2016: 304), future research could focus on the years of the early republic to see how American nationalism developed and spread among the citizenry through the power of the press.

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