THE 23ᴿᴰ LANGUAGE: OFFICIAL EU STATUS FOR IRISH AS PORTRAYED IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PRESS

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Abstract

Irish became the 23ʳᵈ official language of the European Union (EU) in 2007. Due to a lack of qualified translators and interpreters, it is currently subject to a derogation which restricts its use in the EU institutions, a situation which aims to be remedied by 2022. Yet the Irish language represents a unique case even within the Republic of Ireland itself. Under British rule, centuries of repression confined its usage to the rural fringes of society, a state of affairs that an independent Ireland has attempted to improve with limited success. This article analyses how recognition of official EU status for Irish has been depicted in the Republic of Ireland's English-language print media. By performing a qualitative content analysis of the online archives of the country's three major English-language newspapers, the aim is to illustrate how official EU status for Irish has been portrayed, paying specific attention to political, cultural and economic factors.

Keywords: Irish language, European Union, Republic of Ireland, print media, newspapers, media portrayal, qualitative content analysis

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Although the Republic of Ireland has been a member of the European Union (EU) since 1973, it was to be more than four decades until the country's first official language, Irish, was accorded the status of an official and working language of the organisation. As the Republic of Ireland is a bilingual polity, English had previously sufficed at the European level. Yet, following the Maltese government's successful attempt to gain official EU status for the Maltese language on Malta's accession to the organisation in 2004, similar moves were put into motion to give Irish the same prominence (Murphy, 2008; Hoyte-West, 2019). These initiatives were ultimately successful, with Irish becoming the 23rd official language of the EU on 1 January 2007, the first Celtic language and the first minority language to achieve this distinction.

The current study is part of a wider research project examining the translation and interpreting professions in the Republic of Ireland, paying special attention to the unique role played by the Irish language. As outlined in Hoyte-West (2020), which involved a series of interviews conducted with practising conference interpreters active in the Republic of Ireland, it was noted that participants stated that official EU status for Irish had led to favourable media coverage, and greater general awareness of the interpreting profession, with the language being portrayed in a positive light. Given the importance that media can play in setting specific sociocultural and linguistic agendas (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, pp. 171-172), it was decided to conduct a small-scale exploratory study to provide some basic empirical data regarding the latter assertion. This contribution, therefore, aims to analyse how official EU status for Irish has been depicted in the Republic of Ireland's three major English-language newspapers.

The European Union and the Irish language

Closely related to Scots Gaelic and more distantly to Welsh and Breton, *Gaeilge*, the Irish language, is an ancient tongue with a long literary history (Stevenson, 1989, p. 127). Yet, the story of the language is intricately intertwined with the tumultuous history of Ireland itself. Despite attempts to promote it in the years after the country gained its independence as the Irish Free State in 1922, prior events in Irish history such as the Norman invasion (1167), English annexation (1536), the horrors of the Great Famine (1840s), subsequent emigration and population loss – combined with numerous attempts to denigrate and outlaw the use of Irish – have all left their mark on the contemporary use of the language (Carnie, 1996, pp. 99-102). Although the language

was previously spoken across the whole island of Ireland, day-to-day use of Irish outside of the Republic of Ireland's education system is now largely centred on the *Gaeltachtaí*. In these rural Irish-speaking areas, the language has special status and its development is fostered by *Údarás na Gaeltachta*, (Gaeltacht Authority), the regional body tasked with fostering the Gaeltacht's cultural and socioeconomic development (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2020). With regard to the present number of native speakers, the situation is not straightforward to define as all L1 speakers of Irish are also L1 speakers of English; indeed, as Ó Riain (2009, p. 47) states, no exact figures on the number of 'native' Irish speakers are maintained.

Taking into account the complex sociolinguistic and historical context outlined previously, the decision to make Irish an official language of the EU may seem challenging. Yet, as illustrated by the abovementioned case of Maltese, since the enlargement of 2004 the EU has gained experience with languages that were not traditionally viewed as international conference languages (Hoyte-West, 2019, p. 103). As a pan-European organisation with twenty-seven member states, the EU currently boasts twenty-four official languages, representing seven different language families (Baltic, Celtic, Finno-Ugric, Germanic, Hellenic, Romance, and Slavonic) (European Union, 2020). Translation and conference interpreting services are provided from and into all of these official languages by the relevant linguistic directorates, which consist of highly trained in-house and freelance professionals (European Personnel Selection Office, 2020).

However, despite the EU's wide-ranging linguistic expertise, and notwithstanding the fact that Irish has been nominally an official language of the EU since 2007, it has proven – due in part to the factors outlined above – somewhat challenging to incorporate Irish fully into the EU's linguistic framework. Although the language had been used in highly formal situations as a treaty language ever since the Republic of Ireland's accession to EU in 1973 (Truchot, 2003, p. 103), a dearth of qualified professional linguists has meant that implementing the day-to-day use of Irish in the EU's institutions has been more problematic (Diño, 2017). As such, these limitations have meant that there is currently a derogation in place regarding its full use in the EU institutions, which is due to be lifted at the beginning of 2022 (European

Parliament, 2018). Consequently, full translation and interpreting provision both from and into Irish will need to be in place as of 1 January of that year.

Research question and methodology

Building on the overview of the Irish language and its intersection with EU institutional linguistic policy, it was decided to conduct a small-scale exploratory study focusing on the following research question:

- How has EU official status for Irish been portrayed in the Republic of Ireland's English-language print media, with specific regard to political, cultural, and economic aspects?

As previously mentioned, the Republic of Ireland is a bilingual nation, but given the researcher's knowledge of Irish was only at the basic level, it was decided to limit the scope of the analysis to the country's English-language press. With the increasing shift to internet-based content, the print media landscape of the Republic of Ireland has changed noticeably in recent years. Although circulations have declined, the country still boasts a range of English-language national and local newspapers, both tabloids and broadsheets (Burke-Kennedy, 2019). In the interests of ensuring a useful source of research data, it was decided to focus on the three main national quality broadsheet newspapers: the *Irish Independent*, *The Irish Times*, and the *Irish Examiner*. The three newspapers all have long pedigrees. The oldest of the three, the *Irish Examiner*, was founded in Cork in 1841, and the first copy of *The Irish Times* was printed in Dublin in 1859. The youngest, the *Irish Independent*, first appeared in the newsstands in 1905. In terms of daily circulation, according to figures released by the Audit Bureau of Circulation, during the second half of 2018 (the most recent figures available for all three of the newspapers) the *Irish Independent* was the leader with 83,900 print copies, followed by *The Irish Times* (58,131 copies), with the *Irish Examiner* averaging daily sales of 25,419 copies (NewsBrands Ireland, 2020).

Building on a research report carried out by Dublin City University (DCU) on behalf of the development education agency Connect World, (DCU School of Communications, 2009), which included a comprehensive qualitative content analysis of the coverage of developing countries in Irish print media, it was decided to utilise a similar approach but on a smaller scale. As a thorough and positivist-based data

extraction method (Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017), it was felt that opting for a qualitative content analysis would generate data that was valid, reliable and replicable in line with Krippendorff's (2018) assertion. Despite potential criticism as overly basic, this approach has long been utilised when examining different forms of written and other communication (Elo & Kyngäs (2008, p. 107), citing Cole (1988)). It was determined that this would thereby provide a basis for general conclusions to be drawn as well as providing material for further research. Although it could be argued that, given the focus on print media, such an approach was limited by focusing solely on aspects of the printed text rather than including paratextual features such as photographs (Patterson et al., 2016), it was felt that this method of enquiry was appropriate given the study's exploratory nature.

In addition to the aforementioned research project conducted by DCU School of Communications (2009), it was also noted that qualitative-based content analyses have been utilised in a variety of similar projects from a range of disciplines. To note a couple, these have included Patterson et al. (2016), which examined online representations of binge drinking in British newspapers, as well as Kleinschnitger et al. (2019), whose study analysed German and Russian media portrayals of relations between the EU and Ukraine.

Having selected the method, it was decided to obtain the necessary data by performing a qualitative content analysis of the online archives of these three major quality newspapers. Powered by Google, the search involved the following four keywords: "Irish", "official", "language", and "EU". The timeframe for the search parameters was set from 1 January 2007, the date that Irish became an official EU language, up until 1 May 2019.

Results of the analysis

Using the four keywords ("Irish", "official", "language", "EU"), the search of the three online newspaper archives returned over 2,000 results. Of these, a dataset of 88 articles was judged relevant to the research question and thus to the topic under discussion. Within this number, the articles were then divided into three broad thematic categories based on their general content: political (n = 45), cultural (n = 22) and economic (n = 21). Subsequently, within these categories, they were assessed for an overall "positive" or "negative" focus and tone.

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The largest group of articles was those deemed to be "political" in their general content; that is, those documents determined as having a focus largely on domestic political topics, relevant language policies, and the EU itself. Of the forty-five articles framed in this category, nineteen (42%), could be shown as demonstrating a favourable focus. In addition to those articles that were informative in nature, a common theme was also the increased visibility for the Irish language at European level ("Historic day for the EU… as gaeilge" (*Irish Independent*, 23 January 2007); "Irish is our bridge to Europe" (*Irish Examiner*, 6 December 2013). However, the majority of articles in the political category (*n* = 26, 58%) were classed as being negative in tone. The lack of success of various domestic initiatives to promote Irish was highlighted ("Lip service can't save Irish" (*Irish Independent,* 9 December 2007); "Irish language policy is deluded" (*Irish Examiner*, 10 December 2013); "What Cromwell couldn't kill, we will" (*Irish Independent*, 2 December 2007)). In addition, the derogation on Irish in the EU institutions was also portrayed unfavourably, ("European Parliament must end second-class status of Irish" (*The Irish Times*, 5 May 2014); "EU respects Irish language more than our leaders do" (*Irish Examiner*, 18 February 2014)). Particular attention was also paid to the so-called language strike by Liadh Ní Riada ("On strike: Sinn Fein MEP will only speak Irish in Brussels" (*Irish Examiner*, 8 February 2015)), who protested about the lack of full linguistic provision for Irish in the European Parliament by speaking Irish even when interpretation services for the language were not provided.

Twenty-two of the articles analysed were categorised as having a primarily cultural focus. Of this number, thirteen (59%) were generally positive, showcasing the general benefits of EU status for Irish language and culture ("These are exciting times for Irish language studies" (*The Irish Times*, 6 June 2007); "Ó Cuív [the then Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs] to promote Irish on US visit" (*The Irish Times*, 20 February 2008)). On the other hand, nine articles (41%) highlighted negative aspects, such as unfairness and discrimination towards native Irish speakers ("Irish speakers 'discriminated against'" (*The Irish Times*, 15 November 2007); "Irish-speaking children don't get a fair deal" (*Irish Examiner*, 7 September 2010)).

Fifteen (71%) of the twenty-one articles deemed to have an economic focus portrayed official EU status for Irish positively. Here, the overwhelming theme was based largely on the strong employment prospects for Irish speakers in the EU

institutions, given recruitment needs ("Fluent in Irish? You could be in line for an EU job" (*The Irish Times*, 9 June 2016); "Irish speakers can benefit from EU official status" (*Irish Examiner*, 7 February 2008); "Lucrative EU jobs beckon graduates" (*Irish Examiner*, 12 March 2010)). Of the six articles (29%) judged as being negative in tone, these mainly focused on complaints about the high cost of providing Irish language translation services, in part due to the shortage of available personnel ("Irish the most expensive EU language to translate" (*Irish Independent*, 31 August 2017); "Irish spoken nine times at EU meetings" (*The Irish Times*, 9 January 2013); "Irish translation of European Parliament documents costing €43 per page" (*The Irish Times*, 30 August 2017)).

In terms of general positive or negative approaches, it was noted that of the 88 articles, just over half (n = 47, 53%) could be said to have a positive tone towards official EU status for Irish, whereas 47% (n = 41) generally sought to portray the initiative or its ramifications in a negative light. Thus, the findings illustrate that the slight majority of articles are indeed positive in their focus, although it is important to note that the results remain relatively evenly weighted between the two poles.

Conclusions and suggestions for further research

This small-scale exploratory study has demonstrated that, in accordance with the views expressed by the conference interpreters interviewed in Hoyte-West (2020), official EU status for Irish has generally been portrayed positively in the Republic of Ireland's English-language print media, although not overwhelmingly so. Favourable aspects of the initiative were noted in the economic and cultural domains, such as the increased visibility of the Republic of Ireland on the international stage and, by extension, increased interest in Irish language and culture. The economic benefits were strongly underlined, with particular attention paid to the possibilities of Irish speakers receiving highly-paid jobs in the European institutions. On the other hand – and especially so in the political sphere – some of the negative aspects highlighted included shortcomings regarding domestic Irish language policy when compared to EU status. Furthermore, the cost of providing linguistic provision for Irish in the EU institutions also was the subject of criticism, as was the derogation on the use of the Irish language in the EU institutions.

In terms of further research, it would be useful to balance these exploratory findings with a more wide-ranging analysis, allowing these preliminary conclusions to be contrasted with different narratives from other areas of the media, such as television and radio, as well as from online sources. In addition, it could also prove valuable to compare these findings on the English-language press with data on how the Republic of Ireland's Irish-language print and other media has depicted official EU status for the Irish language. According to the European Commission (2020), although some progress has been made in implementing measures towards ensuring adequate future provision for Irish in the EU institutions, a recent report highlights that significant difficulties still remain regarding the recruitment of sufficient numbers of translators and interpreters (European Commission 2019, pp. 3-6). To this end, the European Commission will provide a further report in 2021 to inform whether the necessary personnel-related requirements have been fulfilled. With the derogation due to expire on 1 January 2022, the future still remains uncertain. Therefore, it remains to be seen if the full implementation of Irish, the EU's 23rd official and working language, is to be assured or not.

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