

Memory of the Rising and Futurology in the Same-Sex Marriage Referendum Debate

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Abstract:

According to the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, the ideals of many of the rebels who fought in the 1916 Easter Rising to free the country from a foreign power have not yet been attained by today's Republic: among these ideals Higgins listed wealth redistribution, eradication of inequalities and progressive positions on women's rights. The idea that the task taken on by the 1916 Rising is yet to be accomplished is widespread in Ireland and has often turned into a rhetorical strategy in texts addressing very different topics within different discourses. This paper aims to investigate how the futurology inherent in today's collective memory of 1916 was revisited by Yes and No campaigners in the mainstream debate prior to the same-sex marriage referendum in 2015. Accordingly, the tools of Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Studies are employed to analyse how the potential outcomes of the referendum were framed by both Yes and No sides as (contrasting) accomplishments of a nationalist and supposedly republican agenda.

Keywords: Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Studies, Memory, Same-Sex Marriage Referendum, 1916 Rising

1. Introduction

During a state ceremonial event of 2016 Easter weekend and following a tribute to James Connolly's statue on Beresford Place in Dublin, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, claimed that many of the ideals of the heroes who fought in the 1916 Easter Rising in order to free the country from a foreign power had not yet been attained by today's Republic. In a rousing and impassioned speech, Higgins made it clear what ideals he was referring to: wealth redistribution, eradication of inequalities and progressive positions on women's

rights as the basis for the country's social, economic and cultural transformation (Linehan 2016). It was not the ceremonial splendour to inspire Higgins's talk and evidence of that can be found in the preface to his recent *When Ideas Matter. Speeches for an Ethical Republic*, where he unequivocally restates his position: "So much has been achieved in modern Ireland but our fully inclusive, equal version of a republic is very much an unfinished task" (2017, VIII-IX).

The conviction that the task taken on by the 1916 Rising has yet to be accomplished is widespread in Ireland and, as such, it is often turned into a premise and a rhetorical strategy in argumentative texts addressing very different topics. This is especially the case when features of a typically nationalist discourse are being exploited and re-semiotised in order to tackle a range of social issues. In particular, the study reported in this paper aims to investigate how the futurology inherent in today's collective memory of 1916 was revisited by Yes and No campaigners in the mainstream debate regarding the same-sex marriage referendum¹. Accordingly, the tools of Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis were employed to focus on newspaper articles, Letters to the Editors and transcripts from videos published on social media and websites in early 2015 and to accordingly analyse how the potential outcome of the referendum had been framed by Yes and No supporters as different, often opposite, ideal accomplishments of the nationalist and republican agenda.

2. Context

On 23 May 2015, Ireland made history – as recorded by a Twitter hashtag (#wemadehistory) trending worldwide on that and the following days – and became the first country in the world to introduce the right to same-sex marriage by popular referendum. On the previous day, its citizens had been called to the polls to either approve or reject the Thirty-fourth amendment to the Constitution granting that "marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex" (*Bunreacht Na hÉireann*). With an unusually high turnout, and 60% of the registered voters casting their ballots, more than 62% of them passed the referendum and ratified the amendment which, according to former President Mary McAleese, "was an impressive step by the Irish people to insert true equality into our Constitution" (2016, xi). Despite the No campaigners' attempts to address the issue in the terms of a dramatic, dangerous step away from the God-ordained, traditionally gender-balanced marriage, the choice was actually felt by Yes voters

¹ In *Deconstructing Ireland* Colin Graham famously argued that, as is the case in several other postcolonial societies, the Irish culture is obsessed with authenticity and this self-questioning attitude ushers in a state of suspension, a sort of futurology whereby "Ireland is underwritten by a utopian trope which propels its completion always into the future" (2001, x).

– and therefore by most Irish people – to be about an extension of rights, the end of a blatant discrimination of fellow citizens and a major step towards a more inclusive society. Fundamental democratic values, such as freedom, fairness and equality were argued to be at stake and quite a number of observers drew a connection between the referendum and the commitment to the ideals of Irish as well as universal Republicanism. As journalist, broadcaster and Yes campaigner, Una Mullally wrote just a few days before the vote:

There has been a lot of talk about how this referendum relates to the aspirations we have as a republic and how a Yes vote will in many ways complete a journey set out in the 1916 proclamation of the Irish Republic. But 1916 did not invent those aspirations; it was just one big step along the way. (Mullally 2015)

As soon as the results of the referendum were announced at Dublin Castle, with a fitting rainbow showing its support to the celebrations and carnivals which immediately spread throughout Dublin, Cork and the rest of the country, the Irish Yes hit the headlines of media organizations all over the world and commentators, everywhere, immediately tried to question its historical significance. Una Mullally's argument has ever since resonated with several interpretations of the vote. For instance, in *The Irish Independent*, Sydney-based Eoin Hahessy immediately claimed that the “earsplitting Yes” and the subsequent “collective jaw drop to Ireland's historic decision” were inevitably going to bury old, widespread clichés of Irishness and to prompt a “global rebrand” of it, an achievement only comparable to that of the 1916 Rising:

In just a year, Ireland will mark 100 years since the embers of its nation flickered. The 1916 Rising would occupy the front page of the ‘New York Times’ for 14 days in a row. Just shy of this centenary, Ireland has etched out a new global identity. (Hahessy 2015)

This novel and composite identity, endowed with a newly global outlook but still pretty much rooted in Irish social history, is discussed extensively in *Ireland Says Yes. The Inside Story of How the Vote for Marriage Equality Was Won*, written by Yes campaign leaders Gráinne Healy, Brian Sheehan and Noel Whelan. At the end of a chapter significantly entitled “Truly a Nation of Equals”, the authors relate the Referendum vote to the Irish national character and eloquently establish a link between this and the content of the Proclamation read by Pádraig Pearse in front of the General Post Office on 1916 Easter Monday, a public reading and a political rite which established the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic and has symbolically represented the Rising ever since:

The Irish people have shown their compassion. They have shown profound and touching generosity, humanity and wisdom. [...] This movement saw a group of ordinary citizens undertake an extraordinary venture. With their might and grace these

people have given their hearts and souls to make marriage inclusive for all citizens. We are so proud of these people and of what they have helped to achieve. Their achievement is no less than this: that today, we are true to the words of the Proclamation: ‘The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens [...] cheering all the children of the nation equally [...]’. (Healy, Sheehan, Whelan 2016, 178)

Conceptualizing the legalization of same-sex marriage as *the* true and not only *a* formal accomplishment of the journey started by the 1916 rebels was timeserving and not so troublesome in the contagious enthusiasm following the overwhelming Yes recorded in May 2015. On the other hand, one may wonder whether this inherently political connection was so explicit also in the tense debate and bitter controversies which characterized the constitutional referendum campaigns. And, if so, how did the No side react to such a usage of 1916 by Yes campaigners? Then, regarding Yes supporters, were they all fully confident that treasuring the 1916 heritage for this specific purpose would prove effective? In brief, by answering these questions this study intends to explore what kind of narration the year 1916 had turned into in the year 2015: was it still a repository of shared beliefs to be found at the heart of the Irish identity and genuinely encapsulating progressive and egalitarian values? Or was it just lip service meant to gain institutional legitimacy, a rhetorical tool too frequently – and even routinely – employed in the political arena, regardless of the actual arguments and goals?

The core issues the debate was revolving around, the arguments advanced by each side and, broadly speaking, the very language the referendum debate was couched in held up a mirror to the Irish people and shed new light on many of the developments recently experienced by the Irish society, also insofar as the memory and role of 1916 are concerned. The bewildering speed of such developments certainly adds up to an anthropological revolution, one which is ostensibly being fuelled by an unprecedented wave of secularism. With respect to the rapidity of this radical transformation, suffice it to remember that divorce was illegal in Ireland until 1996, abortion is still illegal unless the mother’s life is in danger, and homosexual intercourse between men was a criminal offence until 1993; even more emblematically, at the same time sexual intercourse between women was not even taken into consideration by the Irish law-system (Conrad 2004). In fact, the parallelism with today’s Ireland becomes even more striking when one considers the prominent role played by lesbian and transsexual activists in the successful Yes campaign.

3. *Tools and Methodology*

The assumption underlying this paper is that a linguistic analysis of the relevant material from the mainstream media coverage of the debate prior to

such an epochal event as the same-sex marriage referendum speaks volumes about the on-going social changes in a formerly staunch Catholic country such as Ireland. In actual fact, to offer insights into the manipulation of language-in-use in crucial areas of communication dealing with topics of pressing concern in communities and societies is exactly what Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aims at (Fairclough 2003; Bhatia *et al.* 2008). Within this framework, to disclose evidence of how these topics are linguistically shaped and represented is the goal of Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Studies, a field which combines the exposure of ideological stances typical of CDA with the tools of Corpus Linguistics (CL), thus performing collocation and concordance analyses on large amounts of authentic, electronically stored texts (Baker 2006; McEnery, Baker 2015).

Accordingly, for the purpose of this study a corpus was compiled by means of the tools offered by the online platform Sketch Engine (Kilgariff 2014). The Same-Sex Marriage Referendum Corpus (SSMRC) is composed of 276,479 tokens and 236,609 types or words, and covers the period from 1 March 2015 to the day of the referendum, 22 May of the same year. It includes a collection of 245 articles, the majority of which were published by either the print or the online edition of the two most read daily newspapers in Ireland: *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Independent*. Only a tiny portion of the total of 245 articles were published by local newspapers such as *The Wexford People*, *The Sligo Champion*, *The Wicklow People*, *The Gorey Guardian* and others, and were included in the corpus on the grounds that they gained resonance upon being published and made the headlines of some national newspaper websites. In order to be selected, articles obviously had either to deal directly with the same-sex marriage referendum or to address some of the crucial issues tackled and debated in the run-up to the referendum. Examples of the latter type are Carl O'Brien and Kathie Sheridan's articles commenting on "Family Values Opinion Polls" and exploring the "changing Irish family" (*Irish Times*, 21 March 2015; 23 March 2015). The corpus also comprises approximately 200 Letters to the Editor published by *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Independent*. As these letters were expected to reflect the voice of the people, the only criterion for their selection was a temporal one: for each of the 12 weeks of the study period, all the Letters to the Editor published on any three days randomly chosen were included in the corpus. Finally, the corpus also contains 12 scripts of as many videos which circulated widely during the campaign, particularly through social media sharing, and were therefore regarded as influential: this qualitative feature, i.e., their capacity to partake in and possibly affect the debate, was assessed according to a quantitative one, i.e., on the basis of the number of views they received on YouTube. Obviously, articles and other texts in the Irish language were excluded, though with much regret, as the corpus software is obviously tailored for the analysis of texts in one language only at a time.

For purposes of comparison, texts were further grouped into 3 sub-corpora: a) those focused on the reasons for the YES; b) those focused on the reasons for the NO; c) those reporting on both from a standard journalistic viewpoint: these last texts were classified as Objective. With respect to the relative visibility and salience of the different positions, it should be pointed out that the Catholic establishment and No campaigners often condemned how television, press and mainstream media seemed in all ways supportive of the Yes cause (*Irish Times*, 11 March 2015; *Irish Independent*, 24 April 2015; 6 May 2015). No supporters complained that, in favouring the Yes cause in their selection of news, media organizations proved to be subordinate to the government, whose credibility had come to depend more and more on the outcome of the referendum. When confronted on this topic, media managers such as Raidió Teilifís Éireann deputy director general, Kevin Bakhurst (*Irish Times*, 25 March 2015), denied any political bias and asserted that such selection was consistent with the social atmosphere, as also confirmed by the opinion polls. Besides, it was explained how difficult it was to find people willing to defend the No vote publicly. Regarding radio and television, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland finally dismissed these complaints in their Annual report.

As for the SSMRC design, one last methodological issue should be addressed regarding the typology of texts selected. In gathering the texts and assembling the corpus, the attempt was to create one, long, machine-readable and heterogeneous text whose language could be regarded as representative (on representativeness in CL see Biber 1993; McEnery *et al.* 2006, 13-21), i.e., illustrative of all the varieties of language broadly employed by those involved in the mainstream debate in Ireland: in other terms, observations on the features and properties of the language in the corpus can be extended to the language of the debate. In this respect, one may object that it is no longer through the press that arguments and opinions are formulated, shared and spread. And it is undoubtedly true that nowadays television and social media have replaced newspapers as far as the social function of opinion-making is concerned. That is exactly why the corpus was designed so as to include also the transcripts of a number of videos deploying the very terms which were popular and typical features of the social media campaigns. However, one should also consider that today's newspapers consistently cover what happens on social media, extensively and in detail, unfailingly reporting on language and arguments of ongoing debates. As a consequence, this recent trend prompted a shift in the newspapers' function, turning them from a secondary into a tertiary source of information, but still one which is representative of the language of social discourses and, therefore, a legitimate component of corpora.

4. Linguistic Analysis

Given the topic and context of the analysis, some of the content words ranking high in the word list provided by Sketch Engine would not surprise anyone (e.g., “marriage”, 2,016 tokens; “people”, 1,252; “referendum”, 1,202; “vote”, 1,079; “gay”, 835; “same-sex”, 716), while some others are certainly more noteworthy. This is definitely the case of “children”, with no fewer than 702 occurrences, a number of which were likely due to the No siders’ endeavour to derail the debate towards collateral issues, such as parenting, adoption and even “surrogacy” (198 tokens) which were actually not at stake. Indeed, these topics were eventually brushed aside as red herring fallacies by impartial commentators, including the Referendum Commission chairman and High Court Judge, Kevin Cross:

This referendum is about marriage – who may marry, who may not marry. [...] Surrogacy is not regulated by the Constitution at all. There is no proposal that it shall be regulated by the Constitution. Surrogacy at the moment is not regulated by law. It is intended to regulate it by law. That regulation will apply irrespective of whether the referendum is passed or not. Adoption is regulated by law. At the moment, adoption is available to married persons, to single people and now, as of recently, to same-sex couples. There will be no change in that if the referendum is passed. (*Irish Times*, 14 May 2015)

Another term with remarkably high frequency in the corpus is “equality”, with 462 tokens, a strategic theme upon which the Yes side invested much: small wonder that 60% of its total occurrences are to be found in the Yes sub-corpus. Also of interest is the high frequency of “family”, counting 428 tokens, whose nature of argumentative *tòpos* is confirmed by its distribution, being concentrated, as it is, in the Yes and No sub-corpora, and almost absent from the Objective one. Other terms emblematic of the SSMRC are “love”, which scores 295 tokens (369 considering all its forms, like “loves”, “loving”, etc.) and whose frequency predictably reaches its peak in the Yes sub-corpus, and “change”, with 296 tokens (477 considering all its noun and verb forms). Interestingly, by running the Word Sketch function of “change” used as a verb, one learns that it primarily collocates with the following direct objects: “constitution”, “mind”, “meaning”, “definition” and “law”. Whereas one may have expected “constitution”, “mind” and “law” to collocate with “change” within this specific context, the other two collocates, “meaning” and “definition”, deserve further remarks which have to be postponed for the time being and to which this essay will return later.

As far as the main hypothesis of this study is concerned, references to 1916 were found to be abundant in the corpus, with 11 occurrences of “1916”, 10 of “Rising” (2 of which in the collocation “Easter Rising”), 17 of “Proclamation”, 12 of “independence” (7 of which referring to the Irish in-

dependence, 2 collocating with “Proclamation of”, and 2 more with “War of”), and, above all, 49 occurrences of “republic”, 3 of “republican” and 2 of “republicanism”. In particular, what comes to the fore is that 9 out of 10 occurrences of “1916” feature in the Yes sub-corpus, that is, in texts conveying or even explicitly supporting the Yes. And it is worth mentioning that the only occurrence of “1916” in the No sub-corpus is to be found in a Letter to the Editor dated 16 April, where, in stark contrast to the other 9 tokens and, most probably, in allergic response to the political usage of 1916 by Yes campaigners, the author argued against any parallelism between them and (his idea of) those who fought in the Rising, allegedly on account of the former’s lack of respect for “conscientious objections in areas such as same-sex marriage”, their “aim of silencing all dissenting opinions”, and their hostility to Christian morality. The letter bitterly concluded that:

It would be supremely ironic, if on the eve of the centenary of 1916, we as a nation endorse the aspirations of those who evidently have little or no respect for conscience and whose aim is to curtail the expression of basic Christian morality and sexual ethics, ushering in a new era of penal law. (Letter to the editor, *Irish Times*, 16 April 2015)

Representing the traditionally bullied – the homosexual community – as the new bullies, because of whom “[t]he unwillingness to endorse same-sex relationships is now routinely and uncritically (and wrongly) equated with racism”, was actually quite pervasive an attitude and a rhetorical strategy among Catholic No supporters. This became even more palpable following the “gay-cake row”, involving a family-run Belfast bakery which refused to provide a cake topping with a pro-gay marriage slogan and its born-again Christian owners who were then sued by the customer and eventually found guilty of discrimination by the Belfast County Court. Needless to say, No siders were outraged at this judgment. Along similar lines, No campaigners and supporters often resented being stereotyped, discriminated and silenced by Yes supporters, and this complaint was formulated in several forms through newspaper articles – the point was repeatedly made by members of the Iona Institute, Vincent Twomey (*Irish Times*, 1 May 2015), John Waters and others –, Letters to the Editors by several citizens and even in a famous video which circulated widely and where a well-known gay man committed to voting No claimed that “there are too many people bullied into silence”. And after arguing against gay marriage – and not against marriage equality, because “for me this referendum is not about equality” – the man in the video explained:

There are many people who feel the same way as I do, but they’re afraid to speak out, because of the extraordinary bullying that’s coming from the Yes campaign. We

shouldn't bow to that intimidation, we shouldn't be scared of the people who are tearing down the No posters. This is not the way a campaign should be run. Family businesses are being closed. Professional careers threatened.

Indeed, words related to the semantic fields of “fear”, “intimidation”, “threaten”, “bully” and even “sue” occur much more frequently in the texts of the No sub-corpus, as long-established patterns were disrupted and overturned, with Yes campaigners and the LGBT community unconvincingly characterized as a lobby of arrogant bullies aiming to curtail the freedom of speech and conscience of believers.

In actual fact, Christian values and teachings were popular topics in public statements and interviews by No campaigners and this triggered emotional and apparently knee-jerk reactions by Yes supporters who, in turn, advocated Christian morality as an essential part of their background and prospects too. By all odds, religious topics were vital to the determination of the referendum outcome, as should be expected in a country like Ireland, and this aspect calls for further considerations which will be relevant to the conclusion of this paper.

Going back to the references to the Rising, “Proclamation” scores the highest logDice – a statistical measure based on the frequency of a collocation, X and Y, regardless of the size of the corpus – among the collocates of “1916”, while among the collocates of “Republic”, “equal” and “equals” (as in “Republic of equals”) score a total of 9 occurrences each and, once again, highlight equality as a pivotal argument of Yes campaigners. A group of adjectives from the same semantic area should also be noticed, as they offer an interesting perspective on this key event of Irish history: “true”, “real” and “genuine”. As the journalist, Carol Coutler, pointed out to me during a private conversation in Dublin, the whole debate revolved around an attempt at defining, or better re-defining, children and family relationships: their true meaning, their real value. This was deemed necessary especially by young open-minded people, including the emigrants of the diaspora, who mobilized in great numbers and decided to go back home just for the vote. By analyzing the SSMRC further, Coutler's opinion was confirmed, in that the corpus was found to feature an unusual amount of occurrences of “true” (52, including its comparative form, “truer”), of “real” (82), and of “genuine” (10). Among the top collocates of “true” there are “meaning”, “marriage”, and, again, “equality”, while “real” often collocates with “lives”, “person/s”, “people”, “faces”, and “names”, suggesting the steady use of a communicative strategy of personalization. Clearly enough, both sides of the argument contended that their ideas and positions were more real and authentic than those of their counterparts, in the respective attempts to “define”, constitutionally as well as morally, ideas of marriage, of family and even of fairness, and to provide all these re-definitions with the legitimacy derived from an honest and comprehensive appraisal of the question. Moreover, in the

Yes sub-corpus only, this appraisal seemed to occur within a “true”, “real” and “genuine” republic (5 occurrences in total).

In this respect, also the collocations of “re-/definition” and “re-/define” are of great interest. In particular, the verb “to define” in all its forms, scores no fewer than 67 tokens and, among its top collocates, there is “Constitution” (the Constitution of Ireland being redefined by the 34th Amendment), “institution” (almost always referring to the civil institution of marriage), “marriage” itself, “state” (generally pertaining the legal frame of the question) and, to a much lower degree, “sexuality” which did not seem to be so much under scrutiny as one would have expected if similar circumstances had arisen in other cultures, possibly including the Italian one. The verb “to redefine” and its forms score 54 tokens and collocates with most of the above words, as well as with “family” (9 times, always as a direct object) and, only in the No sub-corpus, with “undermine”, whereby such process of re-definition was felt to jeopardize the *status quo*. The nominal forms, “definition” and “redefinition”, also score high, with 87 and 19 occurrences, respectively, and they can be found in a range of collocations substantially similar to those of the respective verbs.

As already revealed, religious references are ubiquitous in the corpus: “religion” (with 55 tokens), “religious” (175), “God” (113), “Catholic” (270, plus 4 “Catholicism”), and “Christian” (134, plus 20 “Christianity”) all have high frequencies, thus confirming their pervasiveness in Irish culture and society. What may surprise is that their frequency in the referendum discourse is comparable in the three sub-corpora. Cleverly enough, Yes supporters did not question the religious strain of the debate any less than No supporters. However, when they did, they mostly focused on quite different aspects of it. This can be seen when one considers the bigrams including religious key words. In the No sub-corpus one finds “Catholic position” (logDice: 10.237), “Catholic teaching” and “Catholic schools”, signalling a conservative effort to treasure the “tradition” *per se*. On the other hand, in the Yes sub-corpus “Catholic” collocates with “ethics” and “understanding”, in all probability on account of the Yes supporters’ intent to advocate the tolerance and universalism theologically embedded in Catholicism within the framework of a modern and liberal understanding. “Liberal” is another emblematic example of how views diverged on this point. In actual fact, the term “liberal” was used by both sides, though with opposite semantic prosodies (Stewart 2010): typically negative in No texts (e.g., “liberal elite”; “another yabbering, predictable, old liberal”; “liberal ideological orthodoxy”) and typically positive in Yes texts (e.g., “two educated, decent and liberal people”; “I consider myself liberal rather than religious”). The same irony and negative semantic prosody was also associated to the use of terms from the same, “progressive”, political area in other No texts:

There is too much at stake here for us to think in isolation about the idea of legitimising same-sex marriage, convincing ourselves that we can simply engage in a “pro-

gressive”, “enlightened” and “compassionate” measure without consequences in other contexts. (*Irish Independent*, 29 March 2015)

This antithetical semiotization of the concepts of liberality and progress vividly exemplifies cultural theorist and anthropologist Jan Assmann’s seminal distinction between an approach to cultural memory based on imitation, social conservation and mindless repetition of rites and liturgies, and an approach rather based on hermeneutics, social dynamism and renovation of cultural practices according to interpretive efforts (1997, XII-XIV). Arguably, the ideological polarization described by Assmann portrays the two Irelands facing each other on the day of the referendum better than any other sociological survey.

Another fundamental and marked distinction between the Yes and the No campaigns is reflected in the different collocational behaviour of the class of adjectives referring to ideas of truthfulness and genuineness. The examples of “real” collocating with “lives”, “people”, “person/s” and even “faces” in texts falling into the Yes sub-corpus is clearly symptomatic of the discursive strategy of personalization which has been already hinted at. This very profitable strategy was implemented by campaigners to move as many people as possible, to make them feel the importance of the issue, to make them feel responsible for the impending decision, and to finally get them ready to vote. As Ursula Hannigan cleverly argued at the book launch of the already quoted *Ireland Says Yes*:

The genius of the Yes campaign was to turn the referendum into a national heart-to-heart conversation and replace abstract arguments with real human beings on both sides of the argument. It softened hearts, it melted the hard-hearted. Suddenly, THEM became US, OTHERS became OURSELVES (*Yes book launch*).

Ursula Hannigan, a very well-known journalist and prize-winning political editor for TV3, marked a milestone in the referendum debate when, just a week short of the vote, she came out publicly with a touching article published by *The Irish Times* and immediately shared by thousands of social media users. At the beginning of her piece, she painfully recollects:

I was a good Catholic girl, growing up in 1970s Ireland where homosexuality was an evil perversion. It was never openly talked about but I knew it was the worst thing on the face of the earth. So when I fell in love with a girl in my class in school, I was terrified. (Hannigan 2015)

Then she quotes from her heart-breaking diary kept as a seventeen-year-old girl:

I have been so depressed, so sad and so confused. There seems to be no one I can turn to, not even God. I’ve poured out my emotions, my innermost thoughts

to him and get no relief or so-called spiritual grace. At times I feel I am talking to nothing, that no God exists. I've never felt like this before, so empty, so meaningless, so utterly, utterly miserable. (*Ibidem*)

As Hannigan subsequently ponders in her article, at the time when she discovered her sexual orientation she felt that within the context of her childhood she was not left any option other than to force herself into a state of self-denial, a condition which was to be experienced while always lingering on the verge of a nervous breakdown:

Because of my upbringing, I was revolted at the thought that I was in love with a member of my own sex. This contradiction within me nearly drove me crazy... My mind was constantly plagued with the fear that I was a lesbian. I hated myself. I felt useless and worthless and very small and stupid. I had one option, and only one option. I would be "normal", and that meant locking myself in the closet and throwing away the key. (*Ibidem*)

Hannigan was just one of several famous people who came out during the campaign, told their compelling stories of loneliness and isolation, and voiced their full support for marriage equality. This is the case of former minister Pat Carey, the current Prime Minister and former Health Minister Leo Varadkar, and former president Mary McAleese who spoke out for her gay son, Justin. These high-profile interventions were disruptive and powerful in shaping the referendum. Their strategy of making it real and personal, as in a typical semiotic *embrayage* (Greimas, Courtes 1979), was also employed in Noel Whelan's call to the vote significantly entitled "Remember real people when you vote in marriage referendum":

Remember that those impacted by this referendum are real people whose real lives cannot be dismissed by false slogans. They are our brothers, sisters, daughters and sons, our family, our friends. They include some of our teachers, our shopkeepers, our nurses and our tradesmen. We meet them every day on our streets, in our work place, and everywhere we gather in our communities. Remember they are the people with whom we share this country. They are of us. They and their families have a real and very human need to be recognised as equal. Remember, they have real faces and real names. And then remember that you have the awesome power to give them real constitutional equality with a Yes vote next Friday. (Whelan 2015)

Interestingly, a similar enunciative strategy was present in texts which did not feature "real people" and yet insisted on first and second person pronouns and possessive adjectives (such as "I", "me", "myself", "my", "mine", "we", "us", "ourselves", "ours", "our", "you", "yourself", "your", "yours", etc.) in order to establish a dialogue, as in the slogan "Ask *your* family to come on this journey with *us!*" A comparison among the frequency of first and sec-

ond personal pronouns and adjectives in each of the three sub-corpora shows it to be higher in the Yes sub-corpus than in the Objective sub-corpus, and lowest in the No sub-corpus. In contrast, the distribution of third personal pronouns and adjectives across the three sub-corpora is balanced. This stylistic feature surely made sense as part of a broader attempt to attain a level of closeness, intimacy, and to address the targeted readership and audience as in a face-to-face conversation. As a consequence, the effect of Yes texts on readers and listeners was supposedly perceived to be one of greater engagement, whereas No texts using impersonal viewpoints seemed to take a distance from the very individuals whose marriage they did not want to allow. And such a stiff posture on the interpersonal level (Halliday 1975) seemingly proved counterproductive and was in many ways doomed to fail.

Another brilliant rhetorical ploy and point of strength of the Yes campaign was to rely not so much on terms drawn from the law as “allowing” or “permitting” – with the intended reference to allowing or permitting homosexual people to marry – as on questioning the ultimate legitimacy of this legal *concession*. This, in fact, could be better expressed by means of emotionally charged litotes and similar patterns, as occurred in a letter which asked: “How can we deny two people their chance of happiness” (Letter to the Editor, *Irish Times*, 6 March 2015). A critical shift from *allowing* to *not denying* was also implicit in a compelling public service TV commercial actually made in 2009 by Marriage Equality but broadcast regularly in early 2015. The video showed a young, hesitant man walking a long distance through utterly diverse landscapes, urban as well as rural, and calling at several doors in order to anxiously ask the same question (also in Irish) over and over: “I would like to ask for Sinead’s hand in marriage”. As the advertisement finishes, the viewer is asked: “How would you feel if you had to ask 4 million people for permission to get married?”. The striking rationale of this very persuasive advertisement was that, by voting Yes, people could bring to an end the absurdity of entirely unknown people exerting the right, or better, the unjust privilege, to either allow or deny the marriage between other people in love (*Sinead’s Hand*). This litotic rationale – say no to no – was often reformulated in Yes texts, many of which were common citizens’ letters to the newspapers’ editors. These mails insisted that there is “no rational basis to deny gay couples right to marry”; that a “No vote will still deny people equal rights”; that “no one should be denied their right to it”. As regards the collocational behaviour of “deny” (which, by the way, counts 74 tokens), “right” is shown to be its top direct object collocate, with 20 co-occurrences and logDice 10.266. In turn, No campaigners reacted to this rhetorical strategy by claiming that a Yes vote would deny the rights and needs of “child/children” (9 co-occurrences, 5 of “children” and 4 of “child”) to a father and a mother, despite the fact that, as already asserted, this was not what the referendum was about in the first place.

What also comes to the fore in the language of the No campaign is their focus on the “consequences” (40 out of 62 tokens occur in the No sub-corpus), and particularly on those which “people have not thought about” (Letter to the Editor, *Irish Times*, 18 May 2015). This recurring pattern is made evident by the unusual amount of such modifiers as “unintended” (7 tokens modifying “consequences” and “outcomes”), “unforeseen” (3 tokens, all of which modifying “consequences”), “undisputed” (2 tokens in total, one of which modifies “consequences”), and “hidden” (11 tokens, one of which collocates with “consequences”). When more explicitly stated, the message by No supporters was that a yes Vote would have cast a “shadow of uncertainty” (*Irish Times*, 12 May 2015).

Again, arguments based on suggestive innuendoes and oblique allusions to some hidden danger rather than on any logical reasoning on explicit facts may be argued to be typical of a reactionary, “*ipse dixit*” stance, one which takes some deeply rooted limitations for granted and does not even dare to question their scope and validity. Accordingly, in the conservative sectors of the Irish society, the traditional idea of sex-balanced marriage seemed to become something of a stronghold, a symbolic barrier against the very idea of change, or just development, no matter what its concrete direction was and regardless of possible and rational outcomes. And this anxious and potentially detrimental relationship with the unpredictability of the future was epitomised by a 3-gram, “the next step”, which has 4 occurrences, all in the No sub-corpus, as well as by colloquial idioms and other figurative expressions: “Where will it end?” asked a reader of *The Irish Times*; “I think it’s time to draw the line”, argued another. And a reader of the *Irish Independent* wonders “whether it is safe to usher in the new”. Likewise, the No sub-corpus also shows more references to a not better explained “common sense” (10 occurrences) and to the “ridiculous” (9 tokens) quality of the opponents’ arguments. Dismissing the Yes positions as nonsensical matches the provocative illogicality of certain ironies by No supporters, mostly conveyed through a deliberately plain, almost rude style and only sometimes by the odd flash of rhetorical genius. This approach may be effective with those who are already confident with their choice and happy enough with a superficial, instinctive and colourful presentation of the problem, while it is more likely to disappoint those who are really trying to understand. An instance of superficial, ironical – and in this case hyperbolic – approach to the referendum issue can be read in a brilliant and effective Letter to the Editor written by Brendan O’Regan and published by *Irish Times*, 16 April 2015:

Why marriage is being confined to two people? All of the arguments used to advocate same sex marriage could equally be used (and probably will) to defend polygamy, polyamory, etc. I fear this will be the next step on the liberal agenda which will ultimately balk at monogamy. After all, if more than two people want to get together and marry, surely it would be an offence against equality to deny them?

Sure, we're frequently redefining marriage so why not go the next step? And as for parenting concerns, surely the more parent figures the better? Why stop at two?

When looking closely at the SSMRC, one eventually realizes that, while revolving around the core issue of same-sex marriage, the referendum debate also tested and updated the Irish people's identity, their urge to overcome long-standing taboos and their evolving relationship with the very concept of "limit", one which is no longer embraced within a religious framework only and is increasingly questioned within a political and inherently republican domain.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms that remembrance of the rebel gestures of 1916 is still intense in Irish politics and affects the Irish people's self-representation in ways which are narrative as well as normative. In the months leading up to the referendum, the cluster of values around 1916 especially inspired the Yes side, that is, the large majority of the Irish people, who genuinely meant to update such heritage and to revisit it according to contemporary ideas of solidarity.

In *Deconstructing Ireland* Colin Graham notoriously theorized the Futurology of Irish culture as a response to a permanent condition of abnormality, a never-ending tension towards something always as yet to be achieved. Over the centuries, such tension has typically turned into a reactionary immobility, as shown by Beckett's glorious parody of it in *Waiting for Godot* (1956), but sometimes it has also turned into a progressive call to embark upon a daring journey towards equality and direct democracy. In this case, the Republican ideals of 1916 would be no longer felt like the object of passive remembrance, but as history which helps a people make more history, a powerful source of inspiration whose meaning can and should be persistently re-defined in order to shape a more inclusive grammar of the Irish identity.

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