Sex, lies and thematising Irish
New media, old discourses?

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Thematising Irish in the media reflects the complex and contradictory sociolinguistic and language-ideological situation in Ireland. This article explores some of that complexity by investigating a thread on an online discussion forum on the subject of the first ever party leaders' debate in Irish that took place during the 2011 general election in Ireland. In the discussion thread, three particular discourses emerge: a "discourse of truth" about Irish as lacking both authority as a national language and authenticity as a minority language of a recognizable ethnic group; a discourse of "them and us"; involving a differentiation between "Irish speakers" and "non-Irish speakers", largely based on notions of competence; and, finally, a newly emerging discourse of "sexy Irish", which signals a commodification of Irish speakers as young, beautiful and mediatizable. The features of the forum and the online, real-time evolution of the discussion thread impact in a number of ways upon these discourses and ideologies. However, despite the possibilities afforded by the forum, which are utilized by posters for performing Irish in different ways, these everyday practices are effectively erased and invalidated by the prevailing discourses, which rely strongly on the notion of bilingualism as parallel and discrete monolingualisms.

Keywords: language ideologies, Irish, parallel monolingualism, minority languages, new media

1. Introduction

The General Election of 2011 in Ireland was historic and memorable for many reasons, but one of them was the fact that for the first time a debate between the leaders of the main political parties took place in Irish on the Irish language television station TG4. The "Leaders Debate as Gaeilge" was a media event that sparked considerable interest both in other sections of the media and among the public in
general. One particular response was a thread on the discussion forum Boards, ie, leading to a language ideological debate in Blommaert's (1999) terms. Using elements of computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2004), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, van Dijk 1995), and mainly language ideological analysis (Irvine and Gal 2000, Gal and Woolard 1995, 2001), this article examines the thread, and as such aims to build on Milani's (2008, 2010) and Blackledge's (2004, 2005) work by attempting more cross-over methodological and theoretical approaches between critical discourse and language ideological analyses. I begin with a brief overview of the sociolinguistic and language ideological situation in Ireland in relation to the Irish language. I then attempt to trace the inter-textual chain (Fairclough 1992) and context of the particular discussion by looking at the actual media product of the "Leaders Debate as Gaeltige", which provided the immediate context for the discussion on Boards, ie. The forum and the thread are then described in detail using aspects of Herring's (2004) approach to computer-mediated discourse analysis, before going on to look in particular at a number of discourses that emerge in the discussion and the language ideologies that underpin them.

Three main discourses will emerge from the analysis. First of all a "truth" discourse, advocating the exposure of lies about the situation of Irish, and the contradiction between its official status and its "real world" status. Secondly, there is the presence of a "them and us" discourse (van Dijk 1995), which constructs two dichotomous groups, namely "Irish speakers" and 'non-Irish speakers', and simultaneously creates distance between them, arguing that provision of an Irish language Leaders Debate is elitist and undemocratic. Thirdly, there is a newly emerging "Sexy Irish" discourse, which provides some evidence of the language-ideological shift to bilingualism as added value (Jaffe 2007) in a context of commodification.

Finally, I examine how the technical features of the forum enable and/or constrain the evolution of the discussion and the language ideological debate, before going on to discuss the old and new aspects to the online discussion, and how the "messy" practices of bilingualism and tokenistic Irish get erased (Irvine and Gal 2000) by the prevailing discourses in the discussion forum.

2. Brief overview of sociolinguistic and language-ideological situation in Ireland

Irish can be described as a privileged, minoritised language, and that seemingly contradictory combination of adjectives sums up its complex and complicated situation in Irish society. While the Irish language is privileged as the first official language of the Republic and in areas of public life and the education system,
in many more domains of everyday life, including business and media, it is
minoritised, and English is the dominant language (for an overview of the sociolin-
guistic situation in Ireland, cf. Ó Laoire 2008, Mac Giolla Chrios 2005 and 2006,
and with particular reference to media, cf. Kelly-Holmes 2001 and Watson 2003,
2007). The official policy in education, media, and the public sector can be seen as
a clear example of ‘language planning in the service of nation-building’ (Wright
2005:97), and as an attempt to change an existing language regime — namely the
dominance of English. As a result of this, Irish is taught as a compulsory subject
for most children throughout the period of compulsory schooling. However, this
acquisition policy has not resulted in widespread shift to speaking Irish, and in
fact many people claim to not speak Irish when they leave school. This is borne out
by recent Census data, which shows that a huge number of everyday users of Irish
are actually pupils in the school system. Language policy and planning in relation
to Irish is, however, dominated by a conflict between, on the one hand, the aims of
language management through acquisition planning in order to reverse the status
of Irish in everyday life in Ireland and, on the other, the attempt to guarantee the
linguistic human rights of first language speakers and those who live their lives
predominantly through Irish — a group Ó Laoire (2008) has termed “speakers
of choice”, since there are effectively no monolingual Irish speakers. The former
concern has echoes of an earlier, modernist era of language policy and planning
(as identified by Ricento 2006 and Wright 2005 for example), whereas the latter
reflects a more contemporary (even postmodern) notion of language policy as
responding to the rights of individuals, and to recognizing the diversity of the
speech community, although still in terms of one language or the other, i.e. parallel
monolingualisms (Heller 2006) or “balanced” bilingualism rather than hybridized
practices.

While media policy conceives the bilingual context as primarily one of co-
existing languages, a number of new practices are challenging this conception,
by facilitating more fluid notions of audiences in minority language media con-
texts. These new initiatives, consisting of heteroglossic practices and appealing to
non-fluent second language speakers, constitute a shift in notions of normativity
in minority language media (cf. Kelly-Holmes, Moriarty and Pietikäinen 2009,
and Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011). The development of the Irish language
television station TG4 in 1996 has been one of the key developments in the last
20 years of Irish language policy and planning. The station, crucially, constructed
its mission from the beginning as that of being an entertaining television station
rather than in terms of the discourse of endangerment (Duchêne and Heller 2007)
with the objective of saving the Irish language or the cultural nationalist model,
both of which have dominated Irish language media since the foundation of the
state. The station instead has opted for indigenizing global media genres, using
English language sub-titles for most of its primetime programming, advertising in English, broadcasting programmes in English outside of primetime, dubbing of global media products (e.g. cartoons) into Irish and utilizing a variety of mixed language practices (cf. O'Connell, Walsh and Denvir 2008).

Thematising Irish in the media involves operationalising language ideologies that reflect all of this complexity and involve an interweaving of both superiority (Irish makes us different) and inferiority (Irish is not a real language fit for the real world) discourses, always linked to a discourse of endangerment (Duchêne and Heller 2007) and a discourse about competence in Irish (cf. Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007). The competence discourse is inevitable in a context where issues of ownership and authority to speak have more to do with fluency than ethnicity, location etc. (even despite the existence of officially bilingual areas — the Gaeltacht), since Irish is constructed as a national language "belonging" to everyone in Ireland rather than to a recognizable ethnic or linguistic minority.

3. The Leaders Debate as Gaeilge on TG4

The General Election of 2011 attracted huge interest and media coverage, both within Ireland and internationally, the main reason being the debt and banking crisis facing the Irish economy. The incumbent coalition government of Fianna Fáil (populist centre-Right, previously part of the European People's Party but now part of the Liberal Group in the European Parliament) and the Green Party (as minor partner) was widely considered to carry major responsibility for the debt and banking crisis by having allowed the Irish economy to spiral out of control and running out of money following a period of unprecedented growth and wealth within the country. The Taoiseach (prime minister) Brian Cowen resigned as leader of Fianna Fáil, along with many incumbent TDs (members of parliament), and a new leader, Micheál Martin was elected to lead the decimated party into certain defeat in the election. He is the first of the three leaders in the debate under investigation in this article. The second is the leader of Fine Gael, Enda Kenny. Fine Gael is also a centre-Right party, broadly matching a Christian Democrat agenda (it is part of the European People's Party in the European Parliament), and Fine Gael was predicted to make huge gains in the forthcoming election and to be the senior partner in a new coalition, most likely with Labour, also predicted to be successful in the 2011 election. The leader of the Labour Party (allied to the Socialist Group in the EU) is Eamon Gilmore, and he is the third of the leaders to feature in the debate.

As mentioned in the introduction, this was the first time that a debate in the Irish language (as Gaeilge) was held between party leaders in advance of a general
election in Ireland, and so there was a good deal of media interest in the event. The concept of "leaders debates" is a relatively new one in Ireland, and its introduction and now widespread acceptance show evidence of the impact of global media on the country. The holding of the debate in Irish evidences a particularly interesting example of "indigenization" of this globally mediatized product. As with any thematising of Irish in the media, a discourse around competence (cf. Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007) inevitably surrounded the debate. Enda Kenny is widely known as a fluent Irish speaker, and, although less was known about Micheál Martin’s competence in Irish, his background as a teacher (the same as Enda Kenny) would lead to the expectation among the public that he is someone who can speak Irish, the language being privileged in the educational domain. Less was known about Eamon Gilmore’s competence, and his background as a trade unionist would not lead the public to believe that his Irish would automatically be good. However, it was rumoured that those who had head him speak deemed him to be fluent. One reason posited among the public for the exclusion of the other two party leaders was the lack of competence in Irish on the part of Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Féin, who, having grown up in Northern Ireland, learned the language as an adult, and is the source of some humour for his attempts to speak it (cf. Woolard 2011 for similar examples in the Catalan context). It is fair to say that despite the very complicated ideologies and sociolinguistic status surrounding Irish briefly mentioned above, the Taoiseach is expected to be able to speak Irish — and “speaking Irish” usually means being pretty fluent and "correct" (cf. Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007, Atkinson and Kelly-Holmes 2011). Previous Taoiseach, Brian Cowan, was a fluent second language speaker, who could manage questions in Irish from TG4 at press conferences etc. However, it is important to point out that while competence and fluency in Irish on the part of the Taoiseach are expected, this is also expected to take place within an overall English-speaking frame which the majority can understand easily.

4. The forum: Boards.ie and the thread: “Three way Leaders Debate as Gaeilge”

Boards.ie is a discussion forum, which boasts more than 2 million visits every month, primarily from Irish based users (as indicated by the .ie top level domain) and with discussion of topics of interest to those resident in or from Ireland. There are 365,000 registered account holders, and over 1.3 million threads (including sub-threads) containing more than 20 million posts (www.boards.ie). The thread under investigation here is entitled “Three way Leaders Debate as Gaeilge” and was started on 16th February 2011 at 11.56 in the morning, on the day the debate
was to be broadcast, and the last item was posted at 01.27 on 18th February (the homepage of the forum is shown in Figure 1). The bulk of the activity occurred before, during and immediately after the actual debate. So, the intermediality (Bolter and Grusin 2000) is very immediate — the thread’s creation and continuation were only current and valid in relation to the media event which sparked it and supported it. Interestingly, the initiator of the thread only posted once, igniting the discussion and setting the tone (see below), but not contributing to it. Perma bear, who is against the Leaders Debate in Irish on TG4, and is a strong representative of the “truth discourse” (see below) is the first to respond and is also the most active poster (posting 18 times); the next most active poster, Dubhtach, does not join the thread until it is well underway, at post 63, but goes on to contribute 10 posts. He is in favour of having a Leaders Debate in Irish and represents both the discourse of endangerment and the “bilingualism as added value” discourse, which are operationalised to refute the “truth” discourse, as we shall see below. There are 119 posts on the thread.

The positioning of the thread is also interesting and clearly frames the discussion. The thread is located within a sub-thread of “General Election 2011”, which is itself a sub-thread of “Politics”, in turn a sub-thread of “Soc” (society). The overall thread, in this case “Soc”, in common with all of the overarching threads on Boards.
ie, has its own charter, and posters are asked to read this before they contribute to an individual thread that comes under the macro-thread. The tone for the board is set in the Charter, as the following extract from the Charter for the Soc board shows:

Threads that are not based on serious and legitimate Political discussion will be removed without warning. There are other forums for the silly stuff. (www.boards.ie)

A common feature of “threaded” or chronologically ordered message boards is that respondents and posters have the facility to quote directly from other posters and show that they are quoting them (cf. Wright and Street 2007). This can have the effect of making a particular poster/post more prominent and giving it a greater impact — even where the poster is not a prolific contributor to the thread. Not surprisingly, Permabear is the most quoted poster on the thread (18 quotes), which contributes to increasing further his visibility and dominance. However, the most quoted posters on the thread are not always the most active contributors. Nekkidbiblieman’s and Gizmo555’s posts are heavily quoted, (cf. Wodak and Wright 2007 re. quoting on message boards). “Thanking” is another structural feature of the Boards.ie site, and is similar to “like” in Facebook status updates. Some contributors thank and post; others just thank; while a further group thank before posting.

In terms of language practices in the posting, the overall language of Boards.ie is English, although this is an “implicit” (Schiffmann 1996) or covert policy (Shohamy 2006), which only gets highlighted when boards in different languages are made available. For example, boards are available in a number of different languages, which are listed as “types” or categories. The Irish language board is categorised under rec (recreation). This ordering could be seen to construct an association between speaking Irish and hobbies or past-times, and this in turn could reinforce the idea of speaking Irish as a choice and as something which is not a “normal” part of everyday life. In fact, when a user selects the Irish-speaking forum, Teach na nGaeil, they are given the warning that they are leaving the “safety” of the English-speaking forum. A bilingual notice (with the Irish version first) warns as follows:

Please note that only Irish is spoken/written there (www.boards.ie).

Such policies reinforce the demarcation of languages as separate entities and the concept of bi- or multilingualism as separate or parallel monolingualisms (cf. Heller 2006).

The thread itself has 83 contributions “strictly” in English only as opposed to only 5 which could be classified as being “strictly” in Irish only. Retailivity and Loldog post in Irish twice each, while 24pintsman posts once in Irish. These posters do not contribute to the discussion in English and they also support holding the Leaders Debate as Gaelt. However, almost one quarter of all posts (27 in total).
while predominantly in English, use at least one word (and in some cases many more words) in Irish, reflecting normal everyday practice in spoken language in Ireland. Even the most vociferous opponents of the Leaders Debate as Gaeilge, for example, *Permeable*, use tokens from Irish in their posts. This practice will be discussed in more detail below. In addition, the slogan of boards.ie, “now ye’re talkin’ (see Figure 1), explicitly indexes spoken rather than written speech and Irish “vernacular” English in particular, thus sending the message that this is a speaking forum where Irish-English can be spoken and will be understood.

In terms of Herring’s (2004) criteria, we can see that the thread conforms to an online community. There is a good rate of posting and participation through responding to posts and thanking posters. There is also a high degree of shared knowledge. For example, the following post by *Jim Stark* would be impenetrable to those outside of the Irish context:

> Ok well the debate’s over, thought Kenny stole it. Gilmore did ok too. Martin, same as usual, just griping for shots at Enda!

*Jim Stark* uses the party leaders’ surnames and first names without explanation, and his reference to Micheál Martin’s “same as usual” behaviour assumes a shared knowledge about this particular politician. The use of Irish on the forum, as discussed above, both in a small number of monolingually Irish texts and in messages in which the matrix language is English, is unexplained, and it is taken for granted that members of this community can understand these words. For example, *corn*bb posts while watching the debate (post 34): “The teanga isn’t holding them back” (*teanga* means language, understood as the Irish language). Many of the names and avatars used by posters also rely on shared knowledge of global media products (e.g. *Badabing* (the strip club that featured in “The Sopranos”), and avatars from “The Simpsons”), while others are personal or local coinages, the origins and meanings of which can be gleaned based on shared knowledge. We do find use of standard CMC abbreviations and emoticons, but this is very limited and this perhaps has something to do with the nature of the forum, which is constructed as a place for “serious” debate, as mentioned above. There is a genuine development of the thread, although it has a limited lifespan, which corresponds roughly to the build-up, broadcast and aftermath of the debate.

5. The “truth” discourse

Examining the thread on boards.ie, two particularly strong and familiar discourses prevail. First of all, we see what could best be described as a “truth” discourse, whose purveyors claim to want to expose the scam or lies about the “real” situation
of the Irish language in Ireland, despite official policy. The central claim of this discourse is that Irish lacks both the authority of a "normal" hegemonic language of a modern nation state (Gal and Woolard 2001), since English is the everyday language of the majority of Ireland, and the authenticity in Gal and Woolard's (2001) terms of a living language, the language of a "real" linguistic minority who can be easily identified and demarcated. Closely allied to this is the other strong discourse, namely one of "them and us" (van Dijk 1995), which involves the discursive construction of a notional "them" of Irish speakers as a privileged minority with associated economic privileges. This othering of Irish language speakers is combined with the discourse of truth in order to construct bilingual or Irish language media as undemocratic and excluding. I would now like to examine these discourses in more detail.

*Killer Pigeon*, in introducing the thread, sets the tone for the discussion to follow:

The third in a series of leaders debates will take place on TG4 tonight (16/02/2011) *as Gaeilge*, featuring Enda Kenny, Eamon Gilmore and Micheál Martin. This could turn out to be quite an interesting debate and I imagine that the issue of compulsory Irish for the LC could play an important part in it. It'll also be interesting to see what standard of Irish each of the leaders have, especially when they're put under pressure and not reading from a sheet the whole way through — not that it entirely matters in the grander scale of things. (post 1)

In this opening post, *Killer Pigeon* invokes a number of familiar tropes and discourses. For example, he raises the issue of competence, ("It'll also be interesting to see what standard of Irish each of the leaders have"), which is never far from any mediatisation of the issue of Irish (cf. Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007); he also finishes his post with the inferiority trope, 'not that it entirely matters in the grander scale of things', alluding to the irrelevance of holding a debate in Irish, when the prevailing "commonsense" is that important business and politics in Ireland take place in English.

*Permabear*, the most prolific poster (as mentioned above), responds drawing on the "discourse of truth", that despite 14–16 years of compulsory Irish education, the majority of the population cannot speak it well enough to follow a debate in the language. This allows him to claim that a debate in Irish is therefore undemocratic as it excludes the majority of the Irish population, who do not have sufficient levels of Irish to follow such a debate:

You have to be kidding me. How many people speak Irish well enough to follow a complex political debate in it? This debate deliberately excludes a huge swathe of the electorate. (post 2).
Permabear promotes a strong discourse of monolingualism based on a Republican model of society, arguing that monolingualism is equal and inclusive, and multilingualism is unequal and excluding. Citing Permabear’s original post, Nekkid-Bibleman comes back to argue the opposite, namely that a democracy is about diversity, including linguistic diversity, and not just pandering to the majority (post 9). Permabear responds by making a direct claim about English, implicitly contrasting its inclusivity and democracy with the exclusivity and undemocratic nature of Irish:

regardless of what some aspirational nationalists wrote in the constitution once upon a time, English is the language of the “whole of society”. An Irish language debate, which excludes the majority of the electorate is profoundly undemocratic.

Permabear has many supporters, and collectively they draw on a discourse in which Irish (i.e. bilingualism) is constructed as exclusive and English (i.e. monolingualism) as inclusive. For example:

100% irrelevant, a waste of time, a waste of money and a pure and utter gimmick; I had to laugh at the debate being recorded so they could include English subtitles. Surely this highlights the hypocrisy of the Irish language in this country, i.e. nobody can actually speak it (hotmail.com in post 60).

The truth discourse relies to a large extent on the notion of a real, modern state being monolingual and free of “mixed up” language practices (cf. Ricento 2006, Makoni and Pennycook 2007). For example, C-man enters the debate in post 3 to indirectly counter Permabear’s claim about exclusion by stating:

It was filmed this morning so that when broadcast there’ll be English subtitles.

He is arguing that the advance filming of the debate to enable subtitling makes the debate democratic and inclusive. However, his post is met with derision and provides further ammunition for the truth discourse: DB47 quotes C-man and then adds,

which merely serves to highlight how pointless holding the debate in Irish actually is (post 10).

Here we can see the activation of what Jaffe (2007) terms the “bilingualism as deficit” discourse, which deems that less than full bilingualism involving two separate and complete monolingualisms (“balanced” bilingualism) equates to failure.

The trope of inferiority in relation to Irish (Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007) is utilized and taken for granted in the discourse of truth, as the following excerpt illustrates:
So, this is really a symbolic debate only. I guess that has merit in a way ... but it is symbolic ... as in we are speaking Irish because we are Irish, and we want to promote Irish. It has nothing to do with needing to use Irish to communicate with a segment of the population (ixilan in post 7).

Goldstein offers a similar opinion in post 5:

100%irrelevant, a waste of time, a waste of money and a pure and utter gimmick imo. I can't think of anything less important now than three politicians struggling through a debate in broken Irish just for the sake of it.

Ixlan's and Goldstein's posts illustrate how Irish is constructed as having a lack of authority in the sense of being a "real" language of the majority, which has the everyday functions of a "normal" hegemonic or national language (Woolard 2011), despite official policy or symbolic status. Not only that, but Irish is also constructed simultaneously as lacking authenticity as the real, living language of an identifiable autochthonous minority:

You would have some argument if Ireland had a minority community of monoglot Irish speakers but it doesn't (Permabear in post 17).

The unnecessary, inauthentic nature of Irish which only really has "speakers of choice" (Ó Laoire 2008), since there are effectively no monolingual Irish speakers, is highlighted in many of the posts:

There maybe 100k people with reasonable Irish but if we were to reduce that to the people for whom the debate would be easier to understand in Irish than in English I assume it's at most a few thousand? Maybe less than 5 ... It has nothing to do with needing to use Irish to communicate with a segment of the population (ixilan in post 7)

Throughout the posts, we see the discursive strategy of enumeration and quantification (Moore, Pietikainen and Blommaert 2010, Makoni and Pennycook 2007) being employed by both sides:

... for a hundred thousand people on the island, tonight's debate could be the most important night of the election (NekkidBibleMan in post 6);

There are thousands of people brought up through Irish, both in the school and in the home. There are thousands of people that feel more comfortable communicating in Irish than in English (NekkidbibleMan in post 19)

According to the 2006 census report on the Irish language [hyperlinked], 53,130 people claimed that they used Irish on a daily basis outside the educational system. That's a "certain section of society", yes — but a very small one (Permabear in post 58).
Permabear frequently uses this strategy throughout the discussion, drawing on readily available viewing statistics to back up his argument and contrast the “massive interest in these debates” and the estimated viewership of 1.5 million for the previous debate in English on the first national channel with the small percentage of the population (that) speaks Irish well enough to follow (while expecting the majority to read subtitles (post 8).

In addition, we see the anthropomorphizing (Fairclough 1992) of Irish in many of the posts, a familiar feature of discourses of endangerment (Duchêne and Heller 2007) and their associated counter-discourses, as a living organism, which must be kept alive, revived, preserved etc.

The “truth” discourse of “ outing” Irish as neither an authoritative nor an authentic language is also manifested in less direct and more subtle ways. The use of icons of globalization as indices of what Irish people “really” do and are really like is a particularly powerful way of maintaining this truth discourse. For example, I have the volume turned down, a very nice Bushmills 16 year old in hand, and Queen’s “A Day at the Races” cd on in the background (leincár in post 25)

Only 17 more minutes to endure before Arsenal/Barcelona (RandolphEsq in post 24).

The truth discourse relies on reinforcing the commonsense assumption that although, symbolically, Irish people may subscribe to supporting the Irish language and seeing it as part of their culture and marking them as different from the rest of the Anglophone world, in reality, they like global football and global music. Thus, the “true”, authentic, identity — not just the symbolic one — is constructed in the truth discourse as a monolingual one, expressed in English. It is significant that no poster suggests that an identity can be based on anything less than full monolingualism.

6. “Them” and “us” — othering “speakers of choice”

In the assertions of Permabear and his supporters, we can see the use of the familiar discursive strategy of “them and us” (van Dijk 1995), which involves the othering (see also Jaworski 2007) of those fluent enough to follow the debate in Irish, in contrast to the majority of the Irish population who are deemed to have only basic Irish, despite many years of compulsory education in the language. So, being a “normal” Irish person, and belonging to “us”, means knowing Irish, and buying into the discourse of endangerment and revitalisation at a superficial level, but not speaking the language or claiming to be fluent in it (Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson
2007). NekkidBibleMan's post explicitly names this discourse in a metadiscursive comment about the posts by Permbear and others, when he says

I can understand why people would be uninterested in such a debate, but I can't understand why they'd be against it (post 6).

The "them and us" discourse is implied in all of the above examples of the discourse of truth. However, it is made explicit in the discussion of the content of the Leaders Debate as Gaeilge on TG4, when posters begin to watch and comment on it in real time as it is broadcast. In particular, the mná tí / mná na tí are iconized (Irvine and Gal 2000) as the pampered minority of Gaeltacht inhabitants and Irish "speakers of choice" (O Laoire 2008), who all speak English anyhow and whose continued insistence on speaking Irish requires economic subsidizing and consequently the infliction of economic hardship on the "mostly monoglot English majority" as Permbear describes them. The mná tí / mná na tí are literally the housewives who provide accommodation to school pupils from across Ireland attending Irish college in the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht to improve their Irish. This is a considerable component of the local economy ("them") and is dependent on the fact that Irish is a compulsory subject, not a choice, for "us", in the Irish schooling system. As silverspoon posts (post 83),

... what business is it of any government to oblige children to learn a language, at least in part, on the basis that doing so will provide an economic benefit to some other third party group.

And

Irish language everything has to be subsidized to the hilt to make it viable enough to exist (Phutyle in post 50).

As Blackledge (2010) points out, invoking state expenditure is a common trope in most debates about minority languages, and the discussion of Irish is no exception. The Gaeltacht economy is constructed as divorced from the entire Irish economy; in fact, it is constructed as a type of parasitical entity, a fake economy in opposition to the "real" economy. It needs subsidies to exist and the existence of language policies such as compulsory Irish in education which ensure the survival of the language industry.

The distinction between "them" and "us" is made explicit in DonnachaOne's text (post 92),

perhaps it's just a sign that most Irish speakers are a different demographic than those who post on Boards.ie.
However his claim is undermined by actual practice, since there are a number of posts in Irish throughout the discussion, and these are not translated — implying that participants can actually speak Irish although they may not describe themselves as Irish speakers. Significantly, however, these posts in Irish tend to be either metadiscursive comments about the nature of the discussion on the forum (e.g. 'why is everyone here against Irish?') or they take up the competence discourse, discussing how well or how badly the leaders are doing in Irish, rather than in terms of what they are actually saying in the debate.

The competence discourse is closely tied to the "them and us" discourse in many of the posts, supporting earlier findings that when people want to say something about Irish in the media, they tend to make some sort of linguistic competence claim either about themselves or about the person they are discussing (Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007). The "other" in many posts may simply be anyone perceived as speaking or claiming to speak better Irish than that particular poster; while solidarity and in-group membership are created by posting claims to speak bad Irish or not to speak Irish at all (e.g. "The subtitles let the rest of us know what's going on"). The signaling of a desire to construct oneself as "other" and different from the "we" of the discussion forum is most blatantly made through linguistic rather than discursive practice, in other words by posting a longer opinion in the Irish language — regardless of the content of the post or the opinions proffered.

7. "Sexy Irish" — bilingualism as added value

In terms of newer discourses, there is some evidence of a commodification discourse or a discursive turn towards bilingualism as added value (Jaffe 2007). This discourse in the Irish context has been particularly prevalent in the "Sexy Irish" phenomenon (Kelly-Holmes 2006). This is introduced by Jim Stark in post 27 who brings up the issue of the female presenter of the Leader's Debate as Gaeilge, contrasting her with the moderators (Pat Kenny and Vincent Brown) of debates which have been held in English:

I don't know the woman's name, but she's being a much better host than Kenny or Browne, and much easier on the eyes too [smiley face];

It is immediately taken up by many of the (male?) posters, from both sides of the argument:

She's far superior to the plank [the plank refers to Pat Kenny moderator of one of the English language debates on RTE television] (namitloc1980 in post 28).
In fact, the last "word" in the entire thread goes to this particular discourse in the form of post 119, posted by *Bubblegums*, who spells out the components of this language ideological turn, namely the combination of speaking Irish with beauty, youth and coolness and with economic advancement:

I'm also rather amused that after the debate, with so much negative attitude towards out native language on here and in the country, people in the media and on here are generally in agreement that the best moderator of any of the debates so far is a beautiful, Irish speaking woman! Oh the irony ... I bet some nit wit at some stage told her that being fluent in Irish was a waste of time and would not get her a job ... lol [smiley face].

As mentioned above, and in Kelly-Holmes and Milani (this volume), Jaffe (2007) identifies an ideological shift in the discourse about bilingualism, from 'bilingualism-as-cultural-deficit' to 'bilingualism-as-added-value', and this she sees as linked to all sorts of attributes associated with the bilingual person, namely openness, tolerance, adaptability, intelligence. The "sexy Irish" phenomenon can be seen as part of this trend, with the physical attractiveness of TV personalities being intentionally linked to their bilingualism and in particular their fluency in Irish. Given the role that English plays in contemporary global media, there is now, it could be argued, a counter-discourse of 'monolingualism-as-deficit' emerging. If everyone speaks English, then what is the big deal about being a monolingual English speaker? In this discourse, the first language English speaker or monolingual English speaker needs an additional authenticating feature to distinguish themselves and add cultural capital and value. For Irish people, the Irish language offers this option (cf. Kelly-Holmes 2010).

The "Sexy Irish" phenomenon has its roots in the move from the cultural nationalist model of mediating Irish, whereby Irish speakers were only featured in the media because of being Irish speakers, to a move whereby media personalities began to reveal that they were also Irish speakers. This shift in the iconization (Gal and Woolard 2001) of Irish speakers signaled a fundamental repositioning. However, the transition from bilingualism as deficit to bilingualism as added value is not straightforward in the Irish context. While the Sexy Irish discourse is a fairly new one, competence in Irish has always had capital in the modern Irish state. While Irish might not have been associated with "real world", cool or trendy status domains (cf. Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007), it has been and still is linked to academic achievement, thanks to the 'mega-policy' (Ó Laoire 2008) in the areas of status and acquisition planning: being an educated Irish person generally meant (and still means as we saw earlier in the discussion of the *Taoiseach* 's need for fluency) having an acceptable, even a high level of Irish, and valuing that level. This
is particularly the case among middle-class Irish people in urban centres and key status domains (e.g. politics, education, civil service and university sector).

What the “Sexy Irish” trend does highlight however is an ideological shift — based on a realization that balanced bilingualism — or even widespread high levels of competence — may not be possible and that a new relationship with Irish needs to be developed. The future of the language, as the government knows, is no longer solely in the designated Irish-speaking Gaeltacht areas — if it ever was — but instead among “speakers of choice” in urban areas. More than this, the future of the language also depends on support for it and a passive belief among non-users that it is their language, that they can utilise it as an identity resource and source of validating or authenticating cultural capital to distinguish them from other Anglophones, and that they can do so without having to achieve fluency.

8. Constraining and enabling effects of the forum on the discussion

Although we should not be naïve in differentiating the online from the offline world, it does still seem that the technical features and possibilities of new media impact how issues are discussed (cf. Wodak and Wright (2007) and introduction to this volume), and the discussion of the “Leaders Debate as Gaeilge” on Boards. It seems to suggest that there are both constraining and enabling technical features which make the discussion fundamentally different to one that would take place in a non-mediated form or in an old medium. The first effect of the medium which we can see is that the discussion can happen in real-time as the actual media event — the Leaders Debate as Gaeilge — is also taking place. Thus, taking part in the discussion about the Leaders Debate is for most posters a multi-media event, in which they simultaneously watch the debate and the online discussion unfold. The narration of this multi-mediality is a core part of many of the posts:

Kenny is brutal. He’s lucky only a small number of people are watching this (nam-loct1980 in post 35);

Ok well the debate’s over, thought Kenny stole it (Jim Stark in post 47);

[the Debate] Finished while I was writing it and of course was looking at my screen not the TV so I missed the end (silverspoon in post 52)

By chance, I actually heard what he had said repeated on television between my post and your response. (P. Breathnach in post 73)

Other posters refer to other media use in the course of watching the debate live and watching and/or contributing to the discussion forum about the debate:
Yes, if you turn down the volume, put on the Smashing Pumpkins, and read the subtitles, it's not too bad. (smiley face) (permabear in post 23).

In addition, contributors to the discussion also make use of the other texts at their disposal on the web and post intratextually, by quoting other posters (see above), and intertextually and intermedially, by posting information from and links to other sites and sources to support their own contributions and challenge others. This strategy is particularly effective for providing "facts" as part of the enumerating strategy of endangerment and truth discourse representatives. The inter- and multimediailty of the experience has some interesting effects.

In a particularly interesting case of intermediality, posters cite the newly published transcript of the Leaders Debate as Gaeilge on the TG4 website, thus making use of an additional text, to check their recollection of the debate. In post 69, gizmo55 writes

I read the transcript linked above try to identify the fudging — I can't see it.

He then quotes directly from the transcript, using italics to show this:

_MMM [Micheál Martin]: It'll destroy the Mna Ti and the Gaeltacht economies._

Up to this point, posters have been using their own particular version of "mna Ti", to refer to the Gaeltacht housewives, with the definite article ("na") left in. However, once this part of the debate is cited "verbatim" by one poster, all subsequent posters adopt the different grammatical version given in the transcript of "mnad Ti", which drops the definite article ("na"), both those in favour of the Leaders Debate as Gaeilge and those against. Thus despite the performative possibilities of new media in relation to minority languages (cf. Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011) and the opportunity to "give their Irish a try" in an environment that is less formal than many written forums (cf. Kelly-Holmes 2010), posters still tend strongly towards norms and prefer to follow what is deemed to be a higher authority in norm-setting (In this case, the writers of the transcript in the Irish language television station TG4) than to persist with their own practices. This tendency, I would argue, also has to do perhaps with the nature of the forum, whose charter demands that posters act seriously and discuss serious issues, as mentioned earlier. Thus the possibility of language play and the use of individual or local normativities (cf. Blommaert 2010), which is so prevalent in many online forums and discussions on the Web (cf. Androuatsopoulos 2007, 2010), is absent here.

The real-time development of the discussion before, during and after the Leaders Debate as Gaeilge is also used differently by different posters. Some posters (e.g. Permabear, the most vocal opponent of the Leaders Debate as Gaeilge and purveyor of the truth discourse) seem to blurt out what he is thinking and appears
to appreciate and thrive on the spontaneity of the discussion forum. However, as *Permabear* discovers, the discussion is not quite as spontaneous and “in the moment” as one might think, since it leaves behind its verbatim record and he is forced to review and withdraw one of his earlier statements by a later poster and by information gathered from other sources and posted on the forum. Others prefer to wait; watching the Leaders Debate and lurking on the discussion forum, some thanking individual contributors, before coming in with more considered, less spontaneous opinion pieces. In a sense, then, these posters are taking advantage of the features of the forum, without taking the associated risks of saying something spontaneous which is recorded permanently.

What is also interesting is that the nature of the forum allows a friendly compromise to be reached by the two main opponents, *Permabear* and *Dubhítach*, who both display a shared tendency to cite facts to support their argument. The forum provides a virtual way for “talking it out”, and at the end of the thread, one has the feeling that this has happened. In addition, the forum also allows posters to make guesses about other posters’ credentials in relation to competence claims and credibility. For example, *Permabear*, lists his location as Donegal. Donegal is a peripheral county and has a designated Irish-speaking Gaeltacht area. This geographical location, I would argue, seems to give him more credibility than a poster from Dublin or a surrounding county, where one might expect more urbane opinions (although support for Irish is high among middle-class urban dwellers, the “Hibernian Cosmopolitans” or “HiCos” as pop economist David McWilliams has termed them). A “them and us” discourse and a discourse of truth seems more palatable from someone who might be considered part of “them”, and who might also benefit from some of the subsidies that go to the Gaeltacht and other peripheral areas. As already noted above, *Permabear* is also a prolific poster — with more than 12,970 posts and 4 star status. He is also a moderator, which in itself gives him a certain status of belonging and being at home on the site. *NekkidBibleMan*, his first serious opponent, lists his location as Dublin, the most central part of the country, and he is arguing for diversity and tolerance.

*Lockstep*, also in favour of the debate, but much more reserved and non-confrontational than other posters, lists his location as Connemara, a Gaeltacht area, which automatically gives him credibility and interestingly a perceived competence. *Virmilitaris* comes in to respond to *Lockstep*’s first post by asking him directly ‘Are you fluent yourself Lockstep?’

*Lockstep* has posted nothing about fluency in his previous message, so the cue for asking this question can only be the given location and the shared knowledge among the participants of its significance in Irish-speaking issues. *Dubhítach* also gives fellow posters clues by using an Irish language coined name and he is the only poster to give his location in the Irish language (*Blaith Cliath, Éire*), which is
Dublin. The use of the abbreviated form Bláth Chlaith rather than the official and standard form (Baile Átha Chlaith) that school Irish users would learn and people would see on road signs hints at insider status and deeper knowledge and suggests better than average competence in Irish — perhaps suggesting membership of "them".

Finally, the framing of the forum in English — all housekeeping notices, advertising etc. — tends to give weight to the "truth" discourse and the "them and us" discourse, since this is a place where Irish is not spoken. This is reinforced by Lockstep's post in response to a question by virmilitaris about his personal level of fluency:

My written Irish is terrible though: I know what I want to say but get all the spelling wrong so I ten to avoid Teach na nGaelt.

Teach na nGaelt, as mentioned above, is the Irish-speaking forum on Boards.ie, and clearly Lockstep's view is that if he does not have fluent written Irish, he cannot contribute to this particular forum, and so prefers to stay on the English-speaking boards. Thus, despite the possibilities for languages to mix and make contact in cyber-space, boundary work is still important in new media in order to keep language communities apart.

9. Discussion — the old and the new?

Jaffe (2007) identifies how current ideological repositionings in relation to Corsican revitalization contain 'more of the old than the new', and the same can be said for the discourses on Boards.ie, despite the new medium and the presence of the newer "Sexy Irish" discourse. The discussion relies on the previous trope of inferiority, which constructs Irish as "useless" and having no economic value or "real" world status. In the current context of the economic and banking crisis, this takes on a new imperative and the provision of Irish language media is easily constructed as "pointless" (post 10). As panrich comments in post 11, the country is gone to the dogs with corruption and people are getting vexed over a debate in Irish.

With "real" economic problems that concern the majority, Irish language policy and economic development for officially bilingual areas can easily be constructed in contrast as a "trivial issue". Furthermore, even the new discourse of sexy Irish relies on this older discourse of inferiority. The idea of being able to earn a living through Irish — through the growing market for Irish language products (a move that is mirrored in minority language communities in other contexts (cf. Heller
is understandable only in relation to the previous ideologies of Irish not having any economic value, and it not being possible to earn a living through Irish (unless through a career in education, civil service etc.). In addition, Irish is only sexy now because it was not sexy before.

The familiar trope of inferiority is explicitly named by Wolfe Tone (who has chosen his name to honour an Irish patriot) in post 109:

This is typical of the Anti Irish British attitude exposed for generations, only backward Paddies speak Irish.

Permabear responds as follows:

No, it’s not an “anti-Irish British attitude”. It’s just an empirical and historical fact that the Irish language has always remained strongest in the least economically developed parts of the country, and that when regions do develop economically, the Irish language is lost.

As dubhtach notes,

there is fine line to tread when balancing the need for economic development and the need to preserve the language (post 110).

In Permabear’s response and in other posts above, we can see, despite the emergence of “Sexy Irish”, a new discourse of commodification of monolingualism emerging, namely the idea that speaking only English has value for Ireland in the world today, a value that is possibly diluted by multilingualism, and that recognising English as the authoritative language of the state and admitting the truth about the lack of authority and authenticity Irish has would save money and simultaneously make Ireland more modern and more inclusive. However, it has its inter-discursive roots in the previous discourse of inferiority and modernist discourses of monolingualism.

Despite attempts by the government to promote through a “bilingualism as added value” (Jaffe 2007) discourse the notion of “all of us” as speakers of Irish, “speakers of choice”, those who prefer to speak Irish, but who can also speak English, are contrasted throughout the discussion with “the issue of compulsory Irish”, which is brought up repeatedly by posters. The use of “compulsory Irish” alludes to the idea that to allow this group that choice, the majority must be subjected to learning Irish in school in order to facilitate them and, it is argued by some posters, to afford economic benefits to them. Compulsion is an anachronistic concept in the neo-liberal era. Ireland should be in a post-compulsion era, when individual choice is paramount and compulsion is banished along with controlling institutions of the past, principally the Catholic Church. Thus, the minoritisation and marking of this group of speakers as speakers of choice considerably strengthens
the "them and us" discourse and the "exclusion / anti-democratic" argument. It also sits awkwardly with the "Sexy Irish" discourse, which relies on commodification of certain language practices and on the notion of the media user as consumer rather than citizen — it is about fun rather than rights.

The recent language-ideological turn towards "bilingualism as added value" (Jaffe 2007) and a widening of the notion of who is an Irish speaker, however, not present in the content of the discussion. This "try a little Irish" or performance discourse has been promoted by top-down policy and planning in the last few years (Kelly-Holmes et al 2009, Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson 2007, Atkinson and Kelly-Holmes 2011), and promotes the message that even using the "cúpla focaí" or few words in Irish (derided for many years as tokenistic and emblematic of Irish language revitalisation failure), is okay. For example Seachtain na Gaeilge or Irish language week uses a mixed Irish-English slogan to reverse the ideology that complete competence in Irish is the only possibility. This is also promoted by the Irish language television station TG4 which hosted the leaders’ debate in Irish, and which uses sub-titles for most of its Irish language programmes.

What we see in all but a few posts however, despite the practices of using a few Irish words in a large number of posts from both sides of the argument, is the erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000) of this type of practice as a valid one and the espousal of complete monolingualism in Irish or English or balanced bilingualism between two separate linguistic systems as the only possibility for normal language relations. A few posters such as the following do argue that it is valid to watch the subtitles and attempt to understand some of what is being said, and that this is not a waste of time on their part or resources on the part of the state:

Having watched the debate here is what I think, and before I say anything else please take note I am by no means fluent in Irish so I was trying my best to keep up with the subtitles (SarahBM in post 70)

However, these very few are largely drowned out, and monolingual media are constructed not only as the ideal, but are deemed the best and safest way to ensure democracy.

What effectively becomes erased (Irvine and Gal 2000) in all of the discourses on the boards are the mixed everyday practices, which form an integral part of sociolinguistic reality in Ireland. This is a particularly blatant erasure, since practices on the thread are in themselves bilingual. As we saw earlier, while the majority of the posts use English only, and a very small number use Irish only, nearly a quarter of posts use at least one or two words which, strictly speaking, belong to the Irish language. These terms are opaque to English language speakers who have not learned Irish and reflect the number of domains in which Irish is used and spoken in Ireland in an unremarkable way. Evidence of this "insider" practice
is the request by letincar in one of his posts to explain the word teanga, which immediately marks him as an outsider. These uses of Irish words are unremarkable incidences, and, in fact, the postings in Irish are also not translated, as mentioned above, and posters do not request them to be translated, and some are responded to in Irish and some in English, and some in a mixture of both, while more are appreciated by “thanking” the sender — perhaps where posters are not confident of their competence to post fully in Irish. These mixed practices are in stark contrast to the discourse in which both positive and negative posters see Irish and English as two separate languages and view less than complete competence in Irish as a failure of revitalization, a threat to the survival of the language, and evidence of the lack of authority and authenticity the language is deemed to have.

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