"Why did not your correspondent make an honest inquiry before so writing?": The text structure and discourse of disagreement in Irish letters to the editor

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This paper looks at disagreement in letters to the editor published by national newspapers in late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century Ireland. The research was conducted in the form of a qualitative analysis of argumentative discourse in letters, in many of which disagreement was expressed. Overall, findings provide evidence of recurrent discourse sequences of disagreement in news settings from a period where an Irish public opinion was to gradually shape up and legitimise ordinary people's right to dissent.

KEYWORDS: Argumentation; Disagreement; Text; Discourse; Letters; Newspapers; Public opinion; Ireland.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is much evidence that disagreement has been discussed in a variety of settings and from a wide range of perspectives. On the one hand, a number of studies have focused on disagreement in contexts characterised by ostensibly formal constraints such as politics or the judiciary. This is shown by works on the institutionalised management of disagreement in parliamentary settings (Ilie, 2010; Robles, 2011) as well as constitutional debate (Shiffman, 2002), and research comparing the conventionalized politeness strategies in English and American judicial opinions arguing against previous decisions or judges sitting on the same bench (Kurzon, 2001).

On the other hand, disagreement has been investigated in less formalised settings instantiated by public debate. Thus, for instance, Nir (2011) deals with different forms of disagreement and opposition in social networks, in order to assess the effects of supportive, mixed and oppositional discussion networks on the likelihood of political participation in the US. Furthermore, Uzelgun et al. (2015) examine data from the debate on climate change, showing the relationship between

concessive constructions and participants' attempt to present themselves as reasonable agents who comply with their dialectical obligations in an implicit critical discussion, by accepting what represents possible common ground and justifying in what respects the contradiction with the opponent is raised.

Moreover, a number of works have been devoted to the peculiarities of polemical discourse. To begin with, this has been dealt with as a form of interaction in dialogic spaces. In its capacity as *a contrario* discourse, polemical discourse displays marked dialogism. Even when the interlocutor is not physically present – as with a facebook post targeting a politician – polemical texts appear narrowly focused on one or more opponents, whose discourse they reject and discredit (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1980; Angenot, 1982; Garand, 1998; Amossy, 2009). In addition, polemical discourse has been examined in relation to patterns of argumentation through the media. In this regard, polemical discourse has more recently been described as verbal interaction where complex procedures are established in order to negotiate antagonistic viewpoints (Amossy & Burger, 2011; Amossy, 2011; Burger, 2011; Jacquin, 2011).

In this vein, the aim of this paper is to study the text structure and discourse of disagreement in letters to the editor published by national newspapers in the context of late nineteenth- / early twentieth-century Ireland. This is agreed by many authors to have been a key period in the development of Irish journalism for several reasons. These include the loosening of Government censorship, the greater technological expertise the Irish newspaper industry could benefit from at the turn of the century, a sharp increase in literacy rates and the circulation of newspapers and periodicals, and an increasing readership along with the gradual formation of a public sphere in its own right (Dunlop, 1911; Glandon, 1985; Legg, 1999; Morash, 2010; Rafter, 2011; O'Brien & Rafter, 2012; Steele & de Nie, 2014).

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In Section 2, corpus design criteria are discussed, and the methodological tools are introduced: this will allow for a presentation of the dataset as well as a preliminary review of the procedure(s) through which the data were studied. Section 3 then presents the findings of the study, which are eventually discussed in the light of the relevant literature in Section 4.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was based on a section of *Éirnews*, a small corpus of 115 news texts published between 1895 and 1905 by four national newspapers, i.e. *Belfast Newsletter*, *Irish Examiner*, *Freeman's Journal* and *Irish Independent*. The decade behind the *Éirnews* corpus was selected in

order to assemble a core collection of news texts capable of capturing the essence of contemporary press coverage about the west of Ireland, the territory that commanded most of scholarly as well as public attention (Walsh, 2008; Mazzi, 2019), between the new phase in Irish politics after Charles S. Parnell's death, and the opening stage of twentieth-century nationalism marked by the establishment of the *Irish Independent* in 1905. The corpus texts were downloaded from the official website of the Irish Newspaper Archives,[1] the world's largest and oldest online database of Irish newspapers. Overall, *Éirnews* included specimens of three news genres: news reports, editorials and letters to the editor. As far as this study is concerned, the focus was on the 33 letters in the corpus.

From a methodological point of view, the research adopted a primarily descriptive and data-driven approach. In the search for suggestive patterns, therefore, data were "not adjusted in any way to fit the predefined categories of the analyst", while "recurrent patterns and distributions" were expected "to form the basic evidence for linguistic categories" (Tognini Bonelli, 2001, p. 84). The study was carried out within the broad framework of historical discourse analysis (Brinton, 2001), which has been fruitfully applied to historical news analysis (Brownlees, 2009, 2016a). In particular, a systematic qualitative analysis was performed of any salient patterns of text and discourse structure underpinning the writers' argumentation in those letters where disagreement was voiced (Paltridge, 1996; Amossy, 2011; Burger, 2011; Brownlees, 2016b).

The rich harvest of qualitative analysis in association with news text has been reaped in more than a contribution over the past few years. Accordingly, Fürsich (2009, p. 240) argues that the method involves serious engagement with the chosen texts through genre and rhetorical approaches, and it enables one to successfully "focus on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text". In her view, the meticulous reading and contextualised interpretation of the news text is ultimately suited "to textually derive a particular media content's unique […] conditions of production and how […] text positions audiences in specific […] ways" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 248).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Disagreeing in letters: a prototypical text structure

[1] https://www.irishnewsarchive.com (last accessed 1 July 2019).

Moving on to the findings of the study, it seems appropriate to begin with a brief remark about the letters as a whole. In her study on polemical discourse, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980, p. 12) defines it as 'disqualifying discourse' [*un discours disqualifiant*] aiming at a 'target' [*une cible*]. The main targets attacked in our letters include, first and foremost, the Congested Districts Board, namely the body established in 1891 to combat poverty and alleviate congested living conditions in the west and north-west of Ireland (Breathnach, 2005, p. 11); secondly, the British Government; thirdly, the Chief Secretary for Ireland as the de facto government minister with responsibility for governing Ireland (Kee, 2000 [1972]); fourthly, other individuals such as journalists and priests.

It is worth mentioning that one type of text structure was noted with amazing regularity in association with the discourse of disagreement with the individuals or institutions mentioned above. This is schematised in Figure 1 below:

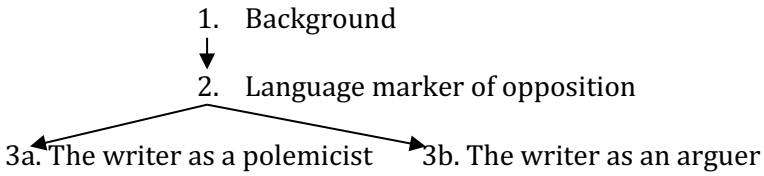

Figure 1 – Recurrent text structure in corpus letters

The first stage in the structure is of a discretionary kind. It is represented by the writers' deliberate intention to provide readers with the necessary background, in order to let them understand the issue they are going to discuss. This may involve either a short account of the incidents that sparked the writers' outcry, or else a brief restatement of the very words of the person or people engaged by writers in critical debate. The second stage marks the onset of disagreement, signalled by what Burger (2011) calls *marques langagiers d'opposition* ['language markers of opposition']. In third place, two interrelated discursive identities are forged for writers. The first is that of writers as polemicists, who level criticisms at the intended target(s) in their capacity as representatives of a dispreferred standpoint. The second is that of writers as arguers supporting a standpoint of their own while at the same time refuting the target's own standpoint. This is again in keeping with Burger's (2011) views on polemical disagreement, whereby he points to two 'complex identities unfolding in interaction' [*des identités complexes se construisant dans l'intéraction*].

In order to describe what this looks like in practice, it might be useful to draw the attention on an example from the corpus. On 27 December 1900, the *Freeman's Journal* published an article with the headline "Connemara Terra Incognita". Essentially, the text read as a critical overview of education in the west of Ireland, where the journalist was very dismissive of the teaching and learning standards of one school in particular. This was the National School in Lettermullen, a remote island off the coast of Co. Galway. As can be seen from the passage reported in (1) below, the school's Principal Teacher is depicted as not knowing a word of Irish. From the journalist's perspective, this can only contribute to stamping out Ireland's true national language from the territories along the western seaboard:[2]

> (1) But it is sad to see the attempts that are being made to stamp out the National Language in these remote places, for the largest attended school in the three islands or on the neighbouring mainland is taught by a schoolmistress who does not know a word of Irish. The children in most cases learn nothing in such schools.

As the schoolmistress referred to by the journalist, Mrs Ellen Healy predictably reacted to the article by sending a letter to the *Freeman's* editor. This was duly published on 10 January 1901 with the headline "The Terra Incognita of Connemara and a lady teacher in the West". An extract from the first part of Mrs Healy's letter is reported in (2) below:

> (2) In your issue of Thursday […], the writer gives a very glowing account of the backward character of, among other places in the West, the island of Lettermullen. […] Why did not your correspondent make honest inquiry before so writing?

In (2), the first two stages of the text structure in Figure 1 are clearly visible. Mrs Healy begins the letter by referring to the relevant article and summarising the key point raised by the journalist. Her disagreement then goes on the record, as it were, by means of a language marker that takes the form of a loaded question, namely "one that has a presupposition that the respondent is not committed to" (Walton, 1999, p. 381). There is no doubt that Mrs Healy's 'why?' plainly took for granted that the writer failed to 'make honest inquiry'. In the following excerpt (3), moreover, the Principal Teacher assumes the two identities numbered as 3a. and 3b. in Figure 1:

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[2] In all numbered examples, emphasis is mine.

(3) Now, I am the "schoolmistress" referred to […] and I must stigmatise that statement as a lie – an unjust aspersion on my love of our grand old Celtic tongue – and a more than unjust, a hurtful and libellous animadversion on my professional character, and one which I shall take the proper steps to meet. […] I do speak Irish. I am competent to instruct and explain through the medium of Irish, and, so far from my pupils "learning nothing", the contrary is the fact, as many a poor boy and girl, taught by myself and my late husband, occupy fairly respectable positions in Ireland and America through the education received here. […] My Inspectors, too, can prove the efficiency of my work, and my respected manager can not only authenticate my statement, but bear testimony to the weary weary drudgery in such a place as this […]

First, she takes on the role of polemicist: her counter-discourse therefore questions the credibility of the *Freeman's* journalist, portrayed as a liar whose allegations are both unfair and libellous. Secondly, she takes on the role of arguer by advancing two standpoints. The first is that she speaks Irish and can use it as a medium of instruction. The second is that her pupils actually learn a lot. Each standpoint is supported by a specific argument. The first is that Mrs Healy's 'Inspectors' and 'Manager' can prove the veracity of her statements. The second lies in the fact that several of her former pupils now occupy respectable and well-paid positions both in Ireland and overseas. Interestingly, the publication of the letter was accompanied by the *Freeman's* editor's apology for any 'inaccuracy' in the previous article, as reported in (4) below:

(4) We are sure that our correspondent, in attacking the system of education in Irish-speaking districts, did not intend to do any injustice to Mrs Healy, and if his remarks were read as referring to her, we regret his inaccuracy in describing her as not knowing Irish.

3.2 The discourse of disagreement: a broader corpus perspective

The scope of this section will extend our appreciation of the dataset, by shifting the attention from the one example taken as a case in point earlier on to the corpus at large. Focusing on the stages of text structure where disagreement is expressed, i.e. stages 2, 3a. and 3b. in Figure 1, discernible patterns tend to emerge from the data. As we noted in the previous section, to begin with, language markers of opposition are very often phrased as questions. Some of these appear more tentative, as with the first two listed under (5) below; some others, such as the

following one, are slightly more personal; others still are definitely more direct and potentially harder to dodge, as is the case for the last two:

(5) Why, I wonder, …?
These being the facts, what becomes of…?

Now I am entitled to ask, and the Chief Secretary will be obliged to answer, by what right…?

…and what I want to know is why in goodness they didn't try to…?
In the name of common sense, and for the credit of Irish journalism, may I ask for what reason…?

What is rhetorically interesting about some of the questions in (5) is that they bolster the writer's case in that they retain a semblance of factuality – cf. 'these being the facts, what becomes of…?' – or they are endoxically rooted in public opinion – e.g., 'In the name of common sense…'. As Amossy (2009, p. 7) rightly points out, this may serve the purpose of "objectively" evoking feelings of indignation from the readership. Only at a later stage are targets presented as worth wholesale moral condemnation.

Such use of questions therefore creates the ideal ground for the voicing of disagreement unfolding as the writer acts as a polemicist and at once an arguer. As far as the discourse of writers as polemicists is concerned, the findings show that targets, particularly political ones, were discredited in three main ways. First of all, they were attacked for taking utterly unreasonable steps to reverse an undesirable state of affairs, as in (6) and (7) below. In (6), the writer found it inexplicable that so many families had been 'struck off' programmes of public works while living in grinding poverty. In (7), likewise, the Congested Districts Board are blamed for their 'attitude' towards the fishing industry, which they were allegedly leaving in an awful state of neglect:

(6) The Guardians and Local Government Board have struck off thirty families who were on the public works [...]. It is a most extraordinary and unaccountable piece of work to do so now, when the poor people stand most in need of assistance...

(7) ...and the Congested Districts Board would seem to be afraid to give any assistance to the starving industry [...] This, I think, is an attitude entirely unworthy of the Congested Districts Board...

Secondly, the authorities were targeted for doing too little, too late to relieve the west of Ireland's economic distress. Hence in (8), the belated recognition of the people's need for employment after the failure of the potato crop only led the competent boards to give 'poor Paddy' – itself a sarcastic, derogatory way to refer to the Irish people – 'a few potatoes in his hat' instead of actual jobs. Thirdly, targets such the British Government were picked and identified as the cause of the evils they were themselves supposed to be fighting, as in (9). In a passage that leaves little to the imagination, the writer asserted that the Government were responsible for the pitiful state of affairs Connemara had got into. It other words, it was the State-sponsored 'machinery of law and armed forces' that allowed the 'exterminators' to prosper that brought about and perpetuated 'the rotten economic system' of absentee landlordism.

(8) Oh the horrid idea of giving poor Paddy a few potatoes in his hat at starvation periods. It is degrading and not reproductive of any good, and never will be. No English labourer would be satisfied so easily...

(9) The Government is responsible for this condition of affairs. It encouraged with its patronage, and assisted with its whole machinery of law and armed forces, the exterminators who devoted all their energies to bringing about the rotten economic system which exists in Connemara.

As regards writers as arguers, finally, there is much evidence that they adopted two general strategies. In first place, they frequently embarked in what Van Eemeren et al. (2007, p. 177) refer to as "criticism of causal argumentation". In many a passage characterized by a high degree of dialogism, writers ideally respond to the target(s)' causal argumentation with reference to the effects the proposed measures may or may not be able to produce. As is often the case, writers can be accounted for as answering critical questions such as the following:

Do the proposed measures indeed lead to the intended result?
Could the intended result be achieved by any other means?

This is apparent from passages such as (10). Here, the writer again referred to the complete failure of the potato crop in Connemara, an all-but-isolated incident in the west of Ireland:

(10) …the failure of the potato crop has been not only partial, but complete […] and now for the first time in Connemara history are very many of our people, shopkeepers, public institutions, etc. getting their

> potatoes in Dublin. […] The outlook is gloomy in the extreme; and "the authorities", instead of sending round their inspectors and acting on "the pinch-of-hunger policy", would be doing more wisely if at once they gave remunerative employment to the people and made preparations for supplying them with good seed next spring. And the opportunities for employment are very many indeed.

In (10), two strands can be identified in the writer's argumentative discourse. On the one hand, he rejected the authorities' policy in that these would fail to accomplish the desired objective. On the other hand, he suggested that they should adopt different policies on the grounds that these would in fact produce the desirable outcome of relieving poverty. The two strands reproduced below intersect each other in a passionate plea for help for the poor people of Connemara, who needed remunerative employment far more than 'inspectors' and eleemosynary relief:

> 1. The authorities' policy (sending round inspectors etc.) should be rejected.
>
> 1.1 The authorities' policy fails to lead to the intended result (relieving poverty).
>
> 2. Different policies (giving people employment etc.) should be adopted.
>
> 2.1. Different policies would lead to the intended result.

Besides undermining the target(s)' argumentation on the effectiveness of the proposed measures, secondly, letter writers were observed to resort to patterns of pragmatic argumentation. In particular, writers' discourse was identified as putting forward Variant I of pragmatic argumentation, through which an action is called for by virtue of the worthwhile end it is assumed to attain (Van Poppel, 2012, p. 99). This can be seen in passages such as that reported in (11). Here, the writer talks about a well-known economic activity of Ireland's coastal regions at least until the end of the nineteenth century. This was kelp making, namely the practice of collecting and air-drying seaweed in order to extract iodine, which was then sold to soap makers as well as the pharmaceutical industry (Mac an Iomaire, 2000 [1938], pp. 139-141):

> (11) I would suggest [...] the substitution of some other process of preparing the air-dried seaweed for the market, for the present crude and ruinous system of burning it. It is a well recognised fact that fifty per cent of the iodine [...]

> becomes volatilized in the process of burning, and is entirely lost. If this 50 per cent of waste could be saved the value of the industry would thereby be considerably enhanced. I understand that a process such as I refer to has been successfully carried out for years on some islands in the North of Scotland.

In an attempt to address the problem of iodine becoming 'volatilized' and going to waste in the burning process, the writer provides his own constructive feedback. As indicated in the schematisation below, he proposed that the method employed in Scotland should be implemented in Ireland, too. This is justified by the beneficial result that would deliver, that is the saving of iodine along with an increased profitability of the industry:

> 1. The method employed in Scotland should be adopted here, too.
>
> 1.1 The method carried out in Scotland saves iodine and makes the industry more profitable.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

At a more general level, the findings presented earlier on show that letters may have played a central role in establishing an embryonic public sphere in Ireland. A few decades after the introduction of a national system of education and facilities such as school libraries as well as reading rooms (McDowell, 1952), the figures from the 1901 census indicated that the percentage of illiterates had dropped from 47% of fifty years before to 14% (Tobin, 2018). Along with that, the abolition of stamp duty, decreasing costs of resources, tools and processes, improved transport for distribution and the intensification of population concentration through urbanisation all ensured that Irish journalism came of age at a time of momentous change in the Irish public landscape.

At the turn of the century, therefore, Irish journalists possessed traits that would set rising standards of professionalism. They "had a skill (shorthand), a professional adherence to objectivity and were aware of new developments within journalism, such as the new form of writing, the interview" (Foley, 2004, p. 381). Yet through the medium of newspapers and other periodicals, opinionated readers also had an opportunity to have their say on the issues that mattered most to them, from national politics to local government, from education to the measures needed to stimulate the economy.

From this perspective, letters to the editor are likely to have been considered by more and more people as evidence of increased

civic involvement and a civil society "in which democratic practices can develop, in which an autonomous public opinion can be formed, and in which people acquire the skills that make them effective citizens in a modern polity" (Kissane, 2002, p. 113). In a period which would later be regarded as setting the preconditions for the emergence and consolidation of Irish democracy over the first three decades of the twentieth century, letters contributed to bringing informed readers' opinions to bear to a new informational order, where they "could be seen, assessed, and, if possible, become part of a public discourse" (Morash, 2014, p. 31).

More specifically, the patterns of text and discourse structure reviewed in Section 3 appear instrumental in shaping up writers' argumentation in three main respects: first of all, in way that is inscribed in the fully legitimised space provided by the print media (Charaudeau, 2005); secondly, in a way that gives rise to antagonistic counter-discourses mobilising public dialogue and debate (Amossy & Burger, 2011) in a country where the latter would otherwise have risked being stifled by a conservative, peasant and rural society dominated by the cultural deference promoted by the Catholic Church and a dominant public discourse privileging solidarity and cohesion over public engagement (Murphy, 2011); thirdly, by integrating distinctive writer profiles such as that of polemicist and arguer through language tools and argument schemes that lead the discourse of disagreement to fulfil the social function of 'coexistence in dissent' Amossy (2011) sees as a desirable way to handle conflict verbally.

While extant research on Irish journalism mainly focuses on the historical development of both the national and the provincial press, this study has delved into aspects of text and discourse structure. By means of a qualitative analysis that uncovered evidence of the strategies for the expression of disagreement, this small-scale research has implemented a method that could be applied to comparative studies of correspondence to Irish editors from a few decades later. This would shed light on any pattern of (dis)continuity in the text structure or the argumentative discourse of the average Irish letter-writer, as it were.

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