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“...like their comrades who fell in 1916”: Argumentative Discourse in Propaganda Sheets from the Irish Civil War

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the discourse of propaganda through a comparative study of two propaganda sheets from the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). Data from the ICW_Corpus unveil the main discourse strategies through which the (respective) enemy was represented and their moral credibility was questioned. Findings show how propagandists implemented recontextualisation and dissociation in relation to the legacy of landmark events in Irish history or the contentious issue of what a republic was supposed to be.

KEYWORDS: Civil War, discourse, dissociation, Ireland, propaganda, recontextualisation

1. INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that propaganda has generated sustained scholarly interest over the past few decades (Zienkowski, 2021; Wodak, 2022). Common to more than one definition of it is the notion that propaganda is a goal-oriented activity, where a target audience is manipulated in keeping with the propagandist's agenda. Thus, Jowett & O'Donnell (2015, p. 3) define it as an “attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist”. Likewise, Wanless & Berk (2020, p. 86) regard propaganda as “the use of persuasive information to manipulate a target audience into a behaviour desired by the propagandist”. Finally, Walton (2007, p. 111) lays emphasis on the involvement of social groups as a distinctive trait of propaganda, which he describes as the concerted effort “to get an audience to support the aims, interests, and policies of a particular group, by securing the compliance” of a mass audience “with the actions being contemplated, undertaken or advocated by the group”.

Looking at propaganda through the prism of text and discourse analysis, broadly speaking, Van Dijk (2006, p. 369) establishes “the control of the shared representations of groups of people” as the general goal of manipulative discourse. This is postulated by the author to strengthen social beliefs that in turn control what people do or say in several situations and over relatively long periods. In order to shed light on the link between discourse and manipulation, Van Dijk (2006) considers interaction strategies in the form of a group's positive self-presentation as opposed to an outgroup's negative other- presentation, along with patterns of semantic, lexical and syntactic regularity in manipulative texts. Furthermore, Walton (1997) discusses the defining characteristics of propaganda as an identifiable type of argumentative discourse. In particular, Walton (1997,

p. 400) argues that propaganda “is most visible and has been most studied as used in war”, where participants “become caught up in an emotional attitude of hate and bitterness” that hardly ever gets people to consider and weigh up evidence from both sides of an issue.

War is indeed a context where propaganda was reported to be successfully used, borrowed and recycled through operations of recontextualisation marked by a high degree of intertextuality. This is viewed by Oddo (2018, p. 21) less as a static relationship between texts than as a communicative process, so that “when two texts share the same meanings, it is because the person who designed the second text recontextualized a meaning from the first”, more or less deliberately extracting some element from the original, so to speak, and repurposing it in a new context.

Overall, the relationship between propaganda and war has been extensively explored in historical research, as in Sevillano’s (2009) thorough investigation of anti- Republican propaganda during the Spanish Civil War. However, scholars appear to be less interested in newspapers and/or propaganda sheets as historical forces than mere historical sources. At the same time, argumentation studies have offered insightful commentary on the discourse of propaganda as a prime example of one-sided argumentation justified by results (Walton, 1997). Only tangentially, nonetheless, have such studies resulted in a systematic examination of propaganda in terms of regularity in discourse strategies against the backdrop of a sound data base.

In an attempt to try and address these gaps, this research is more narrowly focused on propaganda in the brief period of conventional warfare that characterised the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). In particular, the aim of the study is to focus on recognisable patterns in the discourse of propaganda through a comparative study of two well-known propaganda sheets of the age. For this purpose, the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 briefly outlines the historical background of the war with a view to explaining the rationale behind this work. In Section 3, corpus design criteria are discussed, and the methodological tools are introduced: this will allow for a presentation of the data set as well as a preliminary review of the procedure through which the data were studied. Section 4 then presents the findings of the study, which are eventually discussed in the light of the relevant literature in Section 5.

2. “...A POLICY OF WANTON DESTRUCTION”: THE IRISH CIVIL WAR

In the early hours of 6 December 1921, the British and Irish delegations who had entered into formal negotiations after two-and-a-half years of war between Britain and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) signed what became known as the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Although the efforts and ambitions of Irish nationalists were to be frustrated in that it was going to be beyond the British Government’s comprehension to grant Ireland Republican status, the Treaty gave 26 of the country’s 32 counties substantial internal autonomy under the name “Irish Free State”. This was no mean achievement because it afforded the Irish people an unprecedented opportunity to run their own affairs to a far greater degree than would have been the case under the Home Rule settlement produced by the British Parliament in September 1913.

The Treaty, however, contained the seeds of discord, as far as the Irish nationalist movement was concerned. To begin with, the Articles of Agreement required members of

the prospective Irish Parliament to swear allegiance to both the Free State Constitution and the British Monarchy, “in virtue of the common citizenship of Ireland with Great Britain and her adherence to and membership of the group of nations forming the British Commonwealth of Nations”. In addition, the Treaty conferred on Northern Ireland the right to opt out of the Free State, which it did soon after the Treaty was concluded. As a result, the conditions were created for the partition of the island of Ireland, which continues to this day.

On these grounds, both the IRA and Sinn Féin, its political counterpart, split down the middle. On the one hand, those who supported the Treaty saw it as a stepping stone to full Independence to be achieved presently through peaceful constitutional means. On the other hand, those who objected to the Treaty viewed it as a sell-out, the oath of allegiance and partition betraying the Republican ideals behind the Easter Rising (1916) and the War of Independence (1919-1921). The Treaty was ratified by Dáil Éireann (the Irish Parliament) by 64 votes to 57 and subsequently carried by popular vote. Furthermore, the election on 16 June 1922 put anti-Treaty Republicans on the back foot, with the Provisional Government claiming a mandate to implement the Treaty and the Catholic Hierarchy strongly backing the Government (Ferriter, 2005).

When “the anti-treatyites rejected majority rule as a basis for adjudicating the treaty issue” (Kissane, 2020, p. 26), the prospect of Civil War became more immediate. The war effectively broke out in late June 1922 as the anti-Treaty IRA was confronted by the new Free State Army, which sought to regain control of the Four Courts building seized by Republicans in Dublin. After their campaign in the Capital failed, anti-Treaty forces retreated to the countryside, notably behind the imaginary line between Limerick and Waterford. Not only had the IRA “made a mistake by leaving Dublin in the hands of their enemies, thereby allowing the Provisional Government to present itself as the lawful government in overall control of the situation” (Kissane, 2021, p. 50). The landing of Government troops in Counties Mayo, Kerry and Cork also enabled the Army to establish entry points behind the Limerick-Waterford line, which would in due course cut IRA brigades in the south-west, south and north-west off from one another. Benefitting as they did from a constant supply of arms and ammunition from Britain, the Army swept to an outright victory in the war’s conventional phase, although the conflict was to drag on until the spring of 1923. After claiming the lives of about 1,300 Irish people, the Civil War was brought to a close by the anti-Treaty IRA’s unilateral ceasefire on 24 April 1923.

The Civil War has been thoroughly analysed from a variety of angles. These include military strategy (Kissane, 2021), a comparison with similar conflicts in Europe (e.g., Kissane, 2020 on a parallel between the Irish and Finnish civil wars) or, more recently, gender-based violence (Connolly, 2019; Clark, 2020). At the same time, while historical research has raised the public’s awareness of the role of propaganda during the War (Hora, 2017; O’Brien, 2017; McCarthy, 2020; Ferriter, 2021), the idea of investigating propaganda from both sides of the Civil-War divide (“Free Staters” as opposed to “Irregulars”, as they would go down in history) from a discourse perspective, is novel and was a strong motivation for this research. The next section is intended to lay down corpus- design criteria and describe the methodological approach adopted in the study.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was based on the ICW_Corpus, a small collection of 116 news texts from two propaganda sheets published during the Civil War. As such, the corpus is subdivided into two sections: the first one includes 69 texts from the Southern edition of *Poblacht na hÉireann* (Republic of Ireland), a prominent anti-Treaty news outlet; the second encompasses 47 texts from *The Free State*, a pro-Treaty newspaper with a large circulation (Glandon, 1985). All corpus texts were extracted from the Irish Newspaper Archives (INA),¹ the largest most up-to-date collection of news texts from the island of Ireland (Mazzi, 2019 and 2020). The Archives were searched according to the following criteria. First of all, *Poblacht na hÉireann* (PE) was interrogated by using “Provisional (Government)”, “Free State” and “Treaty” as search words, while texts from *The Free State* (FS) were retrieved through the search terms “Republican”, “Irregular” and “rebel(s)”. These terms were selected in order to produce an output of texts which, for each newspaper, could bring insights into how the enemy, their actions and possibly their mind set were represented. Secondly, the Archives were searched between June 1922, when the Civil War broke out, and 31 December 1922, for the purpose of covering the period where violence from both sides was at its most extreme.

As ever, the INA’s search engine displayed a series of texts (or whole newspaper pages) ranked through a relevance coefficient. The first 50 items on the list were individually accessed for the purpose of including the most relevant in the respective section of the corpus. With the exception of very few items that did not in fact meet the search criteria – i.e., news texts that were hardly legible or limited to a short headline with no text to follow – all items were eligible for inclusion. The reason why the corpus section from *Poblacht na hÉireann* is larger than that from *The Free State* is that more often than not, items from PE featured pages where more than one piece was on display, in contrast to FS where most items lay in individual texts. Nonetheless, the corpus strikes a fine balance between the two newspapers in that the texts from *The Free State* are on average longer than those from *Poblacht na hÉireann*.

From a methodological point of view, the study implemented a qualitative approach. Jackson, Drummond & Camara (2007, p. 23) refer to “qualitative enquiry” as research encompassing “all forms of social enquiry that rely primarily on non-numeric data in the form of words, including all types of textual analyses such as content, conversation, discourse, and narrative analyses”. It is significant that, among the types of research they associate with the concept of qualitative enquiry, the authors also feature discourse analysis, which they describe as “a way for examining language as it is used in specific contexts [...], highlighting the practices that comprise the ideologies, attitudes, ideas, and courses of action that systematically constitute the subjects and objects of which people speak” (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007, p. 24). As far as this study is concerned, the emphasis was not so much on pre-determined sets of language tools such as word forms or phraseology: in fact, the idea was to design a small corpus allowing for a more fine-grained analysis and greater appreciation of news discourse in the historical context under investigation here. Accordingly, the “analysis was based on a close reading of the texts, not a key word search” (Mueller, Whittle & Gadelshina, 2019, p. 3). In more detail, the research was aimed at identifying any regular patterns in terms of the discourse strategies

¹ <https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>, accessed November 2022.

(Mazzi, 2022) through which the enemy and their actions were represented, and their moral credibility was questioned.

4. “...FANTASTIC MELODRAMA FOISTED ON THE PUBLIC FOR PROPAGANDIST REASONS...”: THE DISCOURSE OF PROPAGANDA IN THE ICW_CORPUS

Moving on to findings from the study, the data provided ample evidence of two main strategies at work across the ICW_Corpus texts. First of all, recontextualisation was detected as a recurrent communicative process. Secondly, dissociation was identified as a widespread argumentative technique. In keeping with Oddo (2018), to begin with, recontextualisation was observed to be primarily used to brush and repackage anti-British rhetoric in order to attack the (new) enemy and breed the Irish people’s resentment against them. In more detail, the two propaganda sheets included in the corpus were found to repurpose information about the British system in force in Ireland until recent times (example 1 below), or else about the people that helped perpetuate that system (example 2).

With respect to the former, (1) shows that Poblacht na hÉireann threw what it saw as faked inquests into sharp relief. Thus, the inquests on the deaths of prominent nationalists such as Harry Boland and Cathal Brugha, whose lives were claimed by the War, are depicted as “a shocking farce [...] played by a servile Coroner and a packed jury”, which both remind “of the British during the Terror”. In relation to those it saw as the outlaws perpetuating the British system of oppression, moreover, The Free State often railed against the likes of Major Erskine Childers (2). Childers was a well-known writer, politician and militant who had served as secretary of the Irish delegation negotiating the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) with the British Government. Taking grave exception to the terms and conditions of the Treaty, he eventually joined the anti-Treaty forces. In the passage reproduced below, FS exploited Childers’ English origins to question his nationalist credentials (“a consistent British Imperialist”). In spite of the different commitment of the two propaganda sheets, a common thread between texts such as those in (1) and (2) is that in both, recontextualisation may be said to be designed to fit the narrative that the respective enemy was distinctively anti-national in outlook:²

- (1) The inquest on Harry Boland, like that on Cathal Brugha, was a shocking farce, staged by the Provisional Government, and played by a servile Coroner and a packed jury. [...] The proceedings were, of course, like that of the British during the Terror, and following the same example. Inquests will probably be abolished under the R.O.I. Act. While Harry Boland’s assassination unarmed in bed is shielded, two packed Coroner’s juries in the country have brought in verdicts of murder against Republican Soldiers engaged in an ordinary fight. The British system again. (PE, “Faked inquests”)

² In all numbered examples, the source – PE for Poblacht na hÉireann and FS for The Free State – as well as the headline of the article are reported in brackets. Italics for emphasis, wherever present, is mine.

- (2) The diabolical cunning of Major Erskine Childers, D.S.O., should not be underestimated. He has been a consistent English Imperialist all his life. He is always ready with plausible excuses. Recently in the Dail [sic], he admitted having volunteered and fought under the British flag to destroy the Boer Republics; also to having spied on Germany and helped to bring about the war on Germany [...] pretending to help Ireland to throw off the British yoke [...]. (FS, “Sinister Activities”)

As far as dissociation is concerned, secondly, this is postulated by Van Rees (2006, p. 473) to occur where “the speaker splits up a notion considered by the audience to form a unitary concept into two new notions, one of which comprises the aspects of the original notion” considered by the speaker to be real or central, while the other includes aspects deemed to be apparent or peripheral (cf. also van Eemeren, 2019). According to Van Rees (2006, p. 474), dissociation is intended to serve the speaker’s rhetorical aims in that it enables them “to reach a position that is the most advantageous for getting [their] standpoint accepted by the audience, so that the difference of opinion may be resolved” to their benefit.

At the outset, it is noteworthy that dissociation was deployed by the two propaganda sheets in two main contexts. First of all, its presence was established in correlation with passages where writers strived to determine the meaning of landmark events in Irish history, with the Easter Rising (1916) in a pre-eminent position. The Rising had been staged by a radical fringe of the Irish Volunteers along with the socialist republican Irish Citizen Army to proclaim an Irish Republic. Short-lived though it was to be, the Rising proved a watershed moment in the build-up to stunning nationalist success in the general election of December 1918, the War of Independence and the achievement of Independence itself in 1922. Not for nothing does its echo reverberate in more than one passage from corpus texts, where for instance The Free State equates National Army soldiers giving their lives for Ireland to the men and women who fell in 1916, in order to suggest that the new dispensation was in fact carrying out the collective will of the Irish people. Otherwise, dissociation was retrieved in texts where writers went to great lengths to settle the highly contentious issue of loyalty to the Republic, or rather what a true republic was supposed to be, a serious bone of contention in early twentieth-century Irish history.

More specifically, on the one hand, dissociation was documented in Poblacht na hÉireann to undermine the pro-Government press’ argument that, since the Treaty had been ratified by the Dáil and subsequently carried by popular vote, Free Staters were only obeying the will of the Irish people. In a number of texts from the relevant section of the corpus, PE contributors appear to split the two notions of “majority rule” and “will of the people” into two. As can be appreciated from example (3) below, lawful majority rule, which Republican propaganda professed to endorse, is therefore opposed to unlawful majority rule, associated with the Free State’s decision to allegedly “give or sell their country” and “surrender its independence”. Furthermore, the real will of the people, described as the Irish population’s fervent wish for peace and freedom, is opposed to the false will – or rather, “the Cowardice” – of the people. This was claimed by Poblacht na hÉireann to be all too obvious, their decision to accept the Treaty being justified by the British Government’s “threat of continued and more terrible war” to be resumed against Ireland, should its people choose to reject the Treaty itself:

- (3) ...when there is a division of opinion majority rule is the only principle of order. But it is not lawful for the majority to give or sell their country, to surrender its independence, to give away the heritage of posterity. Majority rule has its limits. [...] What is the real will of the Irish people? It is for Peace and Freedom. [...] The threat of continued and more terrible war made some willing to break a sacred oath and take another which they did not mean to keep. That was not the will of the people. [...] Let us face the truth plainly – it was the Cowardice of the people. (PE, Untitled)

On the other hand, dissociation was utilized by The Free State to dispute the anti-Treaty IRA's allegation that, as a dominion within the British Commonwealth of Nations, the Free State was not a republic, which frustrated the Irish people's national aspirations. As shown in passages such as (4) below, The Free State's reply to this line of argument was to split up the notion of "republicanism" into two. Real republicanism, seen as deeply rooted in the "realities" and the pragmatism of State-building in the wake of the War of Independence, is therefore contrasted with false, doctrinaire republicanism, which Free State propagandists correlated with empty "formulas":

- (4) The people have always sought and will always seek freedom under whatever form suits best at the moment. [...] no one who knows the popular mind in Ireland can be so foolish as to assert that the people in so doing committed themselves irrevocably to the Republican form. The undying people is not concerned with formulas or parties; it seeks realities... (FS, "Preserve the Republican ideal")

The idea behind this kind of excerpt was that it is not as important to be a Republic by name as it is to be one in fact. This view is corroborated by many a text in The Free State's section of the corpus, where the prevailing tone is almost didactic. A prime example of this is offered by (5) below. Here, the writer relates the history of some of the world's best-known Republics. In doing so, s/he splits the notion of "Republic" into two: accordingly, republics in reality are opposed to republics by name. Predictably, the Free State is posited as a notable instance of the former in that it is associated with the prototype of "a nation in which the voice of the people is the deciding factor". By contrast, republics by name are accounted for as "oligarchies pure and simple". In this vein, the Republic of Rome is described as "an Empire with the leaders of the army as dictators"; Venice, though nominally a republic, is said to have in fact been "an oligarchy, the common people being completely cut out"; and even seventeenth-century England, with Oliver Cromwell at the helm, was putatively more of an absolute monarchy than a republican state:

- (5) There have been many Republics in the world's history. Most of these were oligarchies pure and simple, but some were more or less democratic. [...] In the Republic of Rome, the chief power was in the hands of two Consuls elected annually [...], but the vast majority of the population were slaves. [...] The Roman Republic lasted for 500 years. For a great part of its existence it was an Empire with the leaders of the army as dictators. In the Middle Ages, [...] Venice became a great maritime power and trading centre, but the chief power

was in the hands of the merchant princes and it was really an oligarchy, the common people being completely cut out [...]. In the 17th century England called itself a Republic, with Crowell at its head, but Cromwell was in reality monarch of England, and an absolute monarch at that. [...] From the foregoing resumé of the Republics of Ancient and Modern times, we can see that for a nation to call itself a Republic is not in itself an unmixed blessing. [...] A nation in which the voice of the people is the deciding factor is a Republic in reality, by whatever name it may call itself, and what we want is the reality. (FS, “Republics old and new”)

Going back to the acrimonious debate on Easter 1916 and its historical legacy, The Free State often compared those who fought in the Rising with anti-Treaty Irregulars, for the purpose of stressing the sharp difference between the two, as in example (6) below. What is crucial to passages like this is the writer’s application of dissociation to the notion of the “legacy of 1916”, as it were. This was split into the two notions of true legacy and false legacy, which in turn advanced the writer’s broad concept of the National Army as well as the State’s police and security forces as the true heirs of “the men of 1916”, as opposed to the Irregulars of 1922. These (“the men of 1922” in example 6) are described as “organized from the irresponsible elements of the community”, rising “against an infant State” and eventually flouting the rules of war to the point of inflicting torment “upon the civilian population”. In contrast, “the men of 1916”, of whom the Irregulars wrongly claimed to be legitimate heirs, are portrayed as “organised from the cream of the Irish-Ireland movement” to rise “against the might of an Empire” and surrender “according to the rules of war”, thereby sparing civilians from unimaginable pain:

- (6) The Irregulars wish to represent themselves as the successors of the men of 1916. The men of 1916 were organised from the cream of the Irish-Ireland movement [...] The Irregulars were organised from the irresponsible elements of the community [...]. The men of 1916 rose against the might of an Empire [...]. The men of 1922 rose against an infant State, struggling to its feet out of the wreckage of war [...]. The men of 1916 rose against the foreign enemy. The men of 1922 rose against their own people. The men of 1916 rose to drive the English out. The men of 1922 rose to bring the English back. [...] The men of 1916 surrendered according to the rules of war, in order to save the civilian population. The men of 1922 violated all the rules of war in order to have revenge upon the civilian population, who failed to support their policy. (FS, “Republics old and new”)

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper zoomed in on the main patterns in the discourse of propaganda from both sides of the Irish Civil War. Taken together, corpus data are consistent with Walton’s (1997, p. 394) view of propaganda as an instance of “persuasion dialogue”, where the proponent avails of “the commitments of the respondent as premises in order to persuade the respondent to also become committed to some particular proposition” they previously had

reservations about. The use of recontextualisation and dissociation in the two propaganda sheets under analysis here could be observed to be a step in such a direction.

More specifically, first of all, recontextualisation ensured that writers' argument be firmly embedded in endoxa as reasonable expectations, in keeping with what an interlocutor could be expected to accept in the social setting of discussion and within the given framework of ideas, traditions and beliefs (Vega Renon, 1998; Greco, 2023). Hence, both *Poblacht na hÉireann* and *The Free State* must have been acutely aware that their deliberate attempt to repurpose anti-British rhetoric by adapting it to the new context (and indeed, the new enemy) might be a powerful weapon, tapping as it was into the popular feeling of revulsion against the British as a deep reservoir from which to bring Free Staters or Irregulars into disrepute – examples 1 and 2, Section 4 – (Mazzi, 2024).

Through dissociation, secondly, the proponent – whether PE or FS – was altogether identified as granting “a concession on an interpretation of his standpoint that is presented as marginal, while taking a firm position on an interpretation that suits him better and that is presented as crucial” (Van Rees, 2006, p. 477). In the context of this study, this could essentially be phrased as follows for the two propaganda sheets: “True enough, the Treaty was accepted by a majority of the Irish people, but that was nothing more than a catastrophic result of unlawful majority rule and the cowardice of the people” (example 3), from *Poblacht na hÉireann*'s perspective; and “Sure, we do acknowledge that the Free State is not a republic by name, but it is definitely one in reality” (examples 4 and 5), from *The Free State*'s viewpoint.

Overall, the presence of such discourse strategies across corpus texts appears to provide evidence that, whether through recontextualisation or the “dissociation of a notion used by [...] an antagonist”, the proponent “is actually making an effort to convince the primary audience” (Wu, 2019, p. 17). Following Wu's theorisation and elaborating on Walton's notion of respondent, therefore, it can be pointed out that each propaganda sheet's argumentative discourse is intended to engage a twofold audience. On one side, it seems specifically addressed to the respective counterpart in the Irish press as an obvious target. On the other, *Poblacht na hÉireann* and *The Free State* (let alone mainstream pro-Government media outlets) only serve as the respective secondary audience, which as such is “only instrumental in convincing the primary audience”, i.e. the Irish general public, of the acceptability of the respective standpoints. This aim appears to be most successfully accomplished in the event of recontextualisation and, even more so, dissociation. By distinguishing putatively distorted, broadened or narrowed meanings from reportedly authentic and exact ones attached to key notions such as “majority rule”, “will of the people” or “Republic”, dissociation was pinpointed to “effectively undermine or unmask the authority of the secondary audience that is attacked” (Wu, 2019, p. 19).

As a path of further research, it would be interesting to investigate whether, or rather to what extent, the discourse of propaganda highlighted by this study with respect to propaganda sheets was also incorporated by quality newspapers of the time. Not surprisingly, this mainly concerns Free State propaganda which, in its efforts to describe the National Army's bravery and outstanding gallantry, the daily press was actively encouraged to draw on and quote liberally (Hora, 2017, p. 115).

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