

Unification, Nationalism and/or Brexit? The impact of the Nationalisms and the Northern Irish Good Friday Agreement 1998–2018 on local media discourse

Sarah Ritt*

Background

In 2018, on the twentieth anniversary of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the treaty that formally ended the civil war in Northern Ireland, three very different kinds of nationalistic ideologies (the term 'nationalist' in this context is mainly used for Irish republicans) are shaping Northern Irish public discourse. The first and perhaps the most widely known is linked to the outcome and consequences of the British 'Brexit' vote. The most prominent and symbolic aspect of this, the possible re-introduction of a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is speculated to undermine peace efforts and only feed into the ideologies and actions of republican paramilitaries.

The second is the just mentioned republicans, who see Northern Ireland as part of the Republic of Ireland, away from the UK. This is the side of the ideological spectrum where parties like Sinn Féin and the paramilitary IRA are situated. In the Good Friday Agreement, this side has committed to reaching their means of a united Ireland solely by democratic means (for example a referendum). The third is the unionists, who are content with the status quo of Northern Ireland being a part of the UK, which does however not automatically mean that they approve Brexit. They see themselves as British and although Northern Ireland does not currently (early April 2018) have a government, the main unionist party (the DUP) was the winner of last year's general election.

Despite this, there is a growing amount of people on all sides, that want to work towards a shared future for their country and, despite having their socio-cultural beliefs,

* University of Vienna, Austria

try to resist the often black-and-white stereotypes invoked by nationalistic thinking patterns. All of these different takes on nationalism and the ideal national state, which influence the handling and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and the attention it is getting twenty years after it was signed, will be the topic of this talk: How do they influence each other? How are the individual strands of nationalism portrayed in the source texts (which can be found below)? Is a mediated form of nationalism even possible in a place, where the population is about equally split into two groups, one who in essence wants to be part of the Republic of Ireland and the other wants to remain within the UK? How is this tension picked up and treated by media outlets, who both point back to the original signing date of the Good Friday Agreement and speculating on how and if it can survive in a post-Brexit UK? And, most importantly: How much attention/agency is given to people who are trying to overcome these nationalist tensions?

Methodology

Although it is neither possible nor practical to aim for a corpus that is anywhere near ‘complete’, I will be taking both a multimodal (cf. Kress 2010) and a multimedial approach to the keyword ‘nationalism’ in connection with the Good Friday Agreement, which will be generating a rather large number of individual items, such as newspaper articles, videos, speeches and perhaps more.

The search itself will be restricted by date: two weeks before and after Good Friday (29th April 2018). Following these criteria, the following media outlets will be searched (for content of all types, not only written articles):

- The online versions of the Belfast Telegraph and the News Letter, two unionist-leaning Northern Irish newspapers
- The Irish Times, from the Republic of Ireland
- The Guardian, from England

In order to be able to focus on the sub-discourse of nationality in these sources, I will be following the general notion of Critical Discourse Studies (cf. Wodak and Meyer 2016) but as this is a very broad term which characterizes a critical, aware and multidisciplinary approach to one’s data and research, I will additionally be making use of the DIMEAN-Model (cf. Spitzmüller/Warneke 2011) to limit the output I am generating by focusing on the traits in the model’s ‘upper level’, the transtextual level, which deals with (among a handful of other factors) with intertextuality, frames and – this is probably the most important aspect for this analysis – historicity.

Tentative outcomes: The – at this point in time very tentative – outcomes of this media survey will most likely be pointing at a climate of tension, the rather unique

situation of Northern Ireland within the EU, where there is not one (like in Hungary or Poland) but two nationalistic groups opposing each other, in addition to the state-changing and unpredictable consequences of Brexit. This tension and the prospect of twenty years of more or less sustainable peace-building attempts being either eradicated or lessened by the change in circumstances that comes with the UK leaving the EU is surely visible in media coverage, and it will most likely show in the usage of topoi related to division of the civic society, hints to a violent past and symbolism of terror and unrest. I do not expect to find many attempts to deal with the topic from a non-nationalistic view.

References

- Kress, Gunther and Theo van Leeuwen. 2010. *Reading Images*. 1996. London: Routledge Kress, Gunther: *Multimodality*. London: Routledge.
- Spitzmüller, Jürgen and Ingo Warnke. 2011. *Diskurslinguistik*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Wodak, Ruth and Michael Meyer (eds.). 2016. *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Wodak, Ruth. 2015. *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean*. Los Angeles: Sage.