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<b>Title</b>	Introduction: Discursive frameworks within academic research
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<b>Publication date</b>	2021-06-11
<b>Original citation</b>	Devlin, A. M., Siller, B. and Ventura, S. L. (2021) 'Introduction: Discursive frameworks within academic research', TEANGA: The Journal of the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics, 12(12), pp. i-xi. Available at: <a href="https://journal.iraal.ie/index.php/teanga/article/view/799">https://journal.iraal.ie/index.php/teanga/article/view/799</a> (Accessed: 9 August 2021)
<b>Type of publication</b>	Article (peer-reviewed)
<b>Link to publisher's version</b>	<a href="https://journal.iraal.ie/index.php/teanga/article/view/799">https://journal.iraal.ie/index.php/teanga/article/view/799</a> Access to the full text of the published version may require a subscription.
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## **Introduction**

### **Discursive Frameworks within Academic Research**

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The idea for this Special Issue arose from a transdisciplinary conference entitled ‘(dis)Covering Discourses’ which was held at University College Cork in 2018. The aim was to bring together scholars spanning a multiplicity of disciplines who, in their research, apply discursive methods and – as the spelling indicates – by doing so, aim to (dis)cover, in both senses of the word, discourses. In the first instance, (dis)covering was considered a process of finding or coming across something unexpectedly. Approaching it from the second perspective, and even more saliently, the implication turned towards the process of discovering as bringing something to light, so to speak, as a task of uncovering. A broad range of researchers from various fields such as Linguistics, Literature, Cultural Studies, Social Studies, Sociology, Government and Politics, Economy, Clinical Therapies and Media Studies answered our call. They succeeded in shedding light on themes such as Politics, Class, Gender, Health, Identity, Institutions, Knowledge, Economy, Migration, Multilingualism, Social Media, Space and Violence. What all the researchers and the papers shared was their methodological approach and their common interest in Discourse Analysis: each employing methods of Discourse Analysis / Critical Discourse Analysis from their own disciplinary perspectives.

For the purpose of this Special Issue the focus was narrowed down to foreground research on discourses within the Irish context. Thus, the following contributions explore recent and momentous transformations that have occurred in discourses within Irish society particularly with regards changing power paradigms and confrontation of the past which are currently challenging conventional discourses around the perception of ‘Irishness’. These discourses, although originating from a specific geographical context, nevertheless reveal practices which can be read in comparison, or contrast, to other societies which are similarly in the process of undergoing significant changes, be they constitutional or societal.

Moving to common theoretical underpinnings of the Special Issue, Bakhtin argued that “verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” (1980, p. 259) constituted by speakers within a concrete situation with a very specific purpose. The contextually-constructed nature of discourses is

reflected in this Special Issue insofar as discourses are conceived not only as an object of study for linguists, but rather as an object of study for anyone working in academia. After all, concepts surrounding the formation, structures and functions of discourses have always held a central position in academic research. However, in order to accommodate a broader array of foci, following Foucault, we consider discourses part of a “heterogeneous ensemble” consisting of “institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid” (Foucault, 1980b, p. 194). This ensemble, as illustrated in the Special Issue, thus goes beyond verbal discourse and includes all structures which traverse our societies. For example, recent work in discourse analysis (i.e. Jewitt, 2017; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Ledin & Machin, 2018) highlights the aspect of multimodality, whereby engaging with visual discourses have become ever more prominent in our societies. Furthermore, we also acknowledge that in parallel, or as a reaction, to discursive studies, there has been a push to extend the boundaries of what we have traditionally envisaged as discourse. Within the discipline of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, for example, Olsen, Pétursdóttir, DeSilvey and Burström (2021), the editors of *After Discourse: Things, Affects, Ethics*, argue that “the increased attention to the existential and aesthetic dimension of experience also brought a new concern for the ineffable impacts of things” (2021, p. 2). It is, therefore, that they assert the terms “material turn”, “the ‘turn to things’” or the “ontological turn”. While this has to some extent been addressed in the Special Issue (see Kiely et al. this issue), it must be noted that, in parts at least, the materiality in which discourses are embedded, has already been taken on board within discursive studies as, for instance, the work on food packaging by Ledin and Machin (2019) clearly shows.

Although the Special Issue adopts a broad view of discourse, it is incumbent upon us to highlight the central position that power holds in all discourses. Hereby, we affirm the relevance of Foucault’s work. According to Foucault power structures run through discourses as they are formed by ideologies, which, in their own way, are based on strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Given the symbiotic relationship we have with discourses whereby we are unremittingly surrounded by, embedded in and informed by discursive ensembles, whilst simultaneously actively shaping them, this issue offers researchers a space to explore and challenge current discourses in their many forms. We wish to think not only about current hierarchies and the power they affirm, but also about what is absent in the current discursive regimes as well as about some of the “discontinuities that cross” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 162) these

discourses. Since discourses are perceived as having formative, regulatory and authoritative characteristics, we endeavour to cover ongoing discourses and to peel back layers and thus discover discourses hidden in society.

## 1. Discourses in and of Ireland

With that in mind, it is necessary to explore what makes Ireland stand out as a distinctive case study which brings to the fore discursive peculiarities of a single geographical context while simultaneously shedding light on more global issues. The answer to that question is not a simple one but, in the context of the current Special Issue, it can be examined via two distinct lenses: rapid transformation; and fault lines established during the inception of the state. On the first account, it is clear that Ireland has undergone a momentous shift in global positioning that has led many to question not only what, if anything, ‘Irishness’ signifies, but also to confront the institutional and societal power structures that once proved hegemonic in shaping the national identity. In brief, the transformation has resulted in a paradigmatic shift from ‘‘from [Catholic] self-denial to [neo-liberal] self-indulgence’’ (Inglis, 2006, p. 34). Casting our gaze through the latter lens, Ireland is a nation which, since its inception as a (partially) independent state, has been precariously straddling multiple and fractious fault lines between the competing narratives of rebellion and obedience. When both lenses are united, we see the number of conflicting discourses grow. These include progressiveness vs orthodoxy, globalism vs parochialism, secularism vs theocracy, and austerity vs extravagance. Such dichotomous rifts have co-existed and intersected in ways, which, to quote Seamus Heaney, ‘‘keep us allied, and at bay’’.<sup>1</sup>

In order to gain insight into how so many ‘‘discontinuities’’ (Foucault, 1980a, p. 162) in discourses have managed to take hold within a small state, it is necessary to look briefly at the ideologies that have shaped, and been shaped by, nation building and identity formation. The Republic of Ireland has been in existence for less than a century. It gained its freedom as a result of a war of independence, followed by a civil war, which left the previously unified, yet colonised country partitioned and in search of a new identity. Fractured from the beginning, it has struggled not only to reconcile itself with partition and the prospect of reunification, but also with distinguishing itself from its former coloniser. With a view to achieving the latter, the state embarked on a trajectory of nation building which would position it in opposition to Britain, and also to the ideologies of the equally newly-formed statelet of Northern Ireland. To

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<sup>1</sup> "Clearances" from *Opened Ground: Selected poems 1966-1996*

do so, it adopted an approach forged on the twin conservative pillars of the Catholic Church and the family (Bradley, 2018). The moralistic and paternalist discourses which emerged became the over-riding official discourse for the following seventy years. It was not until the 1990's that a shift in the official discourse became noticeable. Economic growth seemed to enable the shackles of 'puritanical Catholicism' (Free & Scully, 2018, p. 313) to be shaken off and this, in turn, facilitated the emergence of a newly-confident discourse as the country positioned itself at the vanguard of liberalism whereby 'the 'vibrant', 'flourishing', 'booming' economy appeared emblematic of the nation itself (Free & Scully, 2018, pp. 310–311). The icing on the cake of this momentous paradigm shift from orthodoxy to progressiveness were the 2015 and 2018 referenda on legalising same-sex marriage and abortion respectively, both of which would have been inconceivable to a prior generation.

At a surface level, the discourse surrounding the trajectory of the Republic of Ireland appears to be a unified narrative of a successful transformation from poverty and religion to wealth and liberalism. However, the journey is far from linear or even complete. As explored in this Special Issue from multiple perspectives, bubbling just beneath the surface and periodically breaking through are many unresolved discourses, some of which had literally been buried (see Robinson, this issue). These are discourses which are in conflict with the official discourse of the present; and discourses which construe the fault lines between the past, where the Catholic Church had the power to decide 'which moral acts or practices should be tolerated in civil law, and which should be prohibited' (O'Leary, 2020, p. xi) and the present which foregrounds individualism and what appears to be an ideology of secular neo-liberalism. Although seemingly in conflict, what binds many of these discourses together is the prominence of marginalisation and exclusion – i.e. power structures. According to Villar-Argáiz (2016), marginality and exclusion have dominated the field of Irish studies. Traditionally, this has been explained by "post-colonial shame and guilt" (Free & Scully, 2018, p. 309), which, in the case of Ireland, has been exacerbated by "cultural Catholicism" (Free, 2018, p. 217) followed by, in more recent times, globalisation (Villar-Argáiz, 2016). Of those marginalised, women mostly take the brunt. However, they are not alone as "ideological rebels, disabled people, the disaffected youth, migrants, and ethnic minorities, among others" (Villar-Argáiz, 2016, p. 1) have been marginalised and excluded at various points.

When it comes to women and children, marginalisation had traditionally been framed in terms of religious and moral stigmatization due to unplanned pregnancies or the circumstances of their births. The most egregious examples of this have only come to light since the late 1990's

(Bradley, 2018). The array of sexual and physical abuse sometimes leading to deaths endured by women and children at the hands of Catholic-run and State-approved institutions constitutes one of the deepest fault lines in the discourses between official Ireland and the lived experience of Ireland. Despite the public outcry and the subsequent hard-won gains with regards reproductive rights (see O'Donovan and Siller, this issue), the stigmatization of women with unplanned pregnancies has not lessened. On the contrary, as Bradley notes, while revelations regarding sexual and physical abuse of women and children in Catholic institutions grew, the stigma did not necessarily abate. Rather, moral stigma was replaced with ‘economic and class stigma’ (2018, p. 163). Such a radical shift from Catholic values to neo-liberal ideologies facilitated the marginalisation of a broader range of groups and behaviours to include migrants and working-class families.

Moreover, positioning socio-economic status as a vector of stigmatization enabled a shift in the discourse in and of Ireland from insular to globalised. The discourses of marginalisation and exclusion started to project outwards. As a result, Ireland positioned itself as a legitimate actor in a more global context of marginalisation and exclusion (see Hanlon, this issue, and Kiely et al., this issue). This is most prominent in the domain of migration. Despite a long history of emigration from Ireland, the current discourses exemplify a view whereby migration can only be acceptable if it results in economic benefits to the host country. While Irish emigrants are now positioned in such a way (Devlin & Grant, 2017; McDaid, 2014), immigrants to Ireland are rarely afforded that luxury. This once more gives rise to conflicting official and non-official discourses. On the one hand, since casting off its insular, Catholic worldview, the Republic of Ireland has been engaged in the ‘marketing and theming of Ireland as a global spectacle’ (Conway, 2006, p. 81) open to all. Nevertheless, the official concern with establishing a positive outward face is often at odds with the private positioning of incomers. According to Martínez Lirola (2017) although Ireland has become an established destination for migration for all purposes, ‘the importance of immigrants in the socio-economic changes that have taken place in the Republic of Ireland [...] is hidden, which does not contribute to empowering minorities in discourse, in Irish society and in politics (Martínez Lirola, 2017, p. 154).

Turning now to the fractious discourses relating to the foundation of the state and the partitioning of the island, we can see that they are concerned with the narratives of struggles firstly for independence for the whole island and more latterly for reunification in the north of the country. Essentially the schism is between discourses of what may be referred to as historic

‘armed struggles’ as opposed to what is viewed by some as present-day terrorism (see O’ hAdhmail, this issue). Hearty proposed that “ ‘armed struggle’ was the unquestionable bedrock upon which self-determination would be won” (2016, p. 272) during the fight for Irish independence a century ago. While the legitimacy of such terminology waned over time in the south of Ireland, it gained traction in the north of Ireland especially in the pre-Good Friday Agreement period. It highlights the contradictions inherent in the celebration and romanticising of those involved in the bloody wars which led to independence in the Republic of Ireland while decrying the actions of those engaged in similar actions in the present in the north of the country. In short, it does not fit with “the reinvention of and engagement with Irishness” (Conway, 2006, p. 82) presented to a global audience as a commodified product.

Taken together, it is clear that the discursive landscape of Ireland is conflicting and complex. It is often treacherous interspersed with semi-hidden narratives and dynamic fault lines. It has been brought about by a present, which despite the gloss of progressiveness and globalisation has still not come to terms with its past either regarding the violence through which the state was formed or the past stigmatization and brutalisation of the marginalised and excluded. While we may talk about the “displacement of older discourses of Irishness that stressed national identity, self-sacrifice and family with newly prioritised individualism, mobility, flexibility, entrepreneurship and competition” (Cronin et al., 2009), the transformation may simply represent a pivot from one overarching ideology to another. Despite the attempts we see in the current Special Issue to fully (dis)cover the past and confront hegemonic ideologies (see Early and Gleeson, this issue for a successful reversal of power structures) that uphold the status quo, Ireland seems to be experiencing, on the whole, a symbiosis of an “enduringly Catholic cultural mentality” (Free & Scully, 2018, p. 320) with “a neoliberal logic of redemption through disciplinary self-regulation” (Free & Scully, 2018, p. 309). While this may appear particular to Ireland, the plurality of studies in this Special Issue will undoubtedly shed light on discursive struggles within other emergent nation states which are engaged in the process of identity building,

## **2. The papers**

Theoretical transdisciplinarity and methodological eclecticism are the two main features that characterize this Special Issue. The collection gathers contributions from a rich variety of disciplinary domains, ranging from Linguistics, Psychology and the Social Sciences to Law and Clinical Linguistics. The issue aims to provide the readers with new useful insights to

understand and decodify the reality of contemporary Ireland and, in turn, to apply those insights to other geographical contexts and disciplines. All papers engage in empirical investigation of discourses generated within specific social contexts in order to address controversial socio-political issues of a particularly sensitive nature in the country. Despite the variety of the topics addressed and the diverse interpretive lenses adopted, the articles focus their analysis on two main phenomena: the interaction between competing discourses and conflicting perspectives and ideologies; the discursive strategies adopted to cope with the past and deal with the present for re-constructing a collective identity or re-asserting one's present voice.

The contribution of Jennifer O'Donovan and Barbara Siller, which opens the first section of the volume, examines the abortion discourses generated in Ireland in 2018 during the Referendum to Repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution. The article undertakes a thorough analysis of the competing discourses produced around the Referendum which is operationalised on two levels. On the one hand the authors engage in the study of the less regulated online discourses emerging on Facebook pages in the form of reaction-comments to 'official' posts; on the other hand, they examine the posters designed by the most prominent bodies conducting the 'yes' and 'no' campaigns. By referencing and adapting Reyes's categories of legitimation, the authors illustrate how the strategy of emotion is the prevalent discursive strategy employed by the competing sides to achieve a duality of aims: to construct their own identity in antithetical opposition to the other; and to charge their stance with strong emotional appeals, thus contributing to the polarization of their positions.

The study by Féilim O'hAdhmaill examines the interaction between competing discourses in situations of political conflict. Drawing on Foucault's idea of 'regimes of truths', which are established by dominant discourses, and Gramsci's concept of the masses' spontaneous assent to dominant ideology, O'hAdhmaill offers a complex and nuanced view of the competing discourses existing around Ireland's historical and contemporary conflicts with Britain, as they appear in the reports published in 2019-2020 by the Irish News and Irish Times, the most authoritative broadsheets in the North and the South of Ireland respectively. The paper focuses in particular on the discourses around the Anglo-Irish conflict in 1919-21, the partition of Ireland in 1921 and the violent conflict in Northern Ireland between the years 1969-98. Foregrounding a diverse range of examples, O'hAdhmaill illustrates how the political and ideological division on the island surrounding its partition is reflected linguistically in the choice of lexical items and semantic networks. The author's analysis provides new insights into the complexity of the underlying perceptions of the conflicts by making apparent the



existence of competing discourses and, therefore, different understandings and interpretations of the events.

The first section ends with the contribution of Stephanie Hanlon which focuses on the policy narratives regarding so-called marriages of convenience and their correlation with human trafficking and sexual exploitation, produced by the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) between the years 2006 and 2016. By combining corpus analytic techniques with fine-grained Critical Discourse Analysis, the author scrutinizes the argumentative practices adopted by the ICI to endorse policy agenda on Immigration. The article points at the inconsistencies and contradictions in the ICI's discourses. The author unveils the coexistence of competing ideologies behind the representation of non-EU Nationals who are portrayed in a discriminatory light despite the official policies of promoting migrant rights. Additionally, she shows the co-occurrence of competing discourses around the concept of victimhood by highlighting the presence of two different representations of victims: victims as voiceless and fragile subjects; and victims as accomplices in the attempt to breach Immigration regulations. By pointing out the inconsistencies in legislative discourse, the article uncovers the serious struggles at the centre of the policy process.

The second section of the volume opens with the contribution by Sarah Robinson and Angela Veale that focuses on the public discourse emerging after the discovery of a mass grave of babies in the Tuam Mother and Baby Home in 2014. Through analysing the discourse of letters sent to the Editors of the Irish Times, Robinson and Veale examine the struggles of Irish citizens to negotiate a contemporary collective narrative which is able to make sense of the horrors of the past and to address a national identity dilemma that arises as a natural consequence of the discovery. Drawing from Ahmed's work on cultural emotions, the authors illustrate how shame emerges as the predominant emotion which imbues the rhetorical strategies used by the Irish letter writers to construct a moralizing space where collective responsibility can be negotiated. Robinson and Veale highlight the psychological struggle the writers experience when trying to find ways to integrate this shameful past into the Nation's identity narrative and stresses how, in many cases, the letter writers argue for the continuation of denial of responsibility thus implying their inability to deal with the past.

The second article in this section concentrates on the debate about the sexualization of children in Irish media. The authors, Elizabeth Kiely, Debbie Ging, Karl Kitching and Máire Leane engage in a critical discourse analysis of a corpus of 21 national Irish newspaper articles

published between the years 2012 and 2014. The authors unveil the discursive strategies used by Irish media to represent children as passive, voiceless subjects and to ascribe to parents the entire responsibility for their protection from sexualization. While acknowledging the global nature of this issue, they point out how the discourse on sexualized childhood serves the purpose of constructing a counter-narrative of an idealized and deceptive Irish past where children's innocence was safeguarded and guaranteed. The article argues that the persistence of the media's focus on sexualization discourse served a specific agenda that on the one hand aimed at overlooking Ireland's long history of child abuse and disregard for marginalized children, and on the other hand, aimed at hypocritically re-asserting national commitment to children's wellbeing.

The Special Issue concludes with the contribution of Emma Gleeson and Elizabeth Early that examines the results of an intervention in a long-term care setting in Ireland. The study explores the responses of ten residents of a nursing home to four virtual talks delivered via an online platform. Through a linguistic analysis of the interviews of the participants, conducted before and after the intervention, Early and Gleeson succeed in making the often unheard voices of elderly people heard. The article highlights the desire of this specific generational group to regain agency by affirming their wish to choose; and their desire for social engagement that enables them to enact their identity through the encounter with others and the act of 'experience sharing'. The paper has the merit of pointing at the necessity of a care system that considers older adults as human beings and unique individuals who have social and intellectual needs and whose voice must be valued and taken into account.

The richness of the Special Issue lies in the plurality of disciplinary, theoretical and methodological approaches brought together by a common interest in challenging pervasive discourses. The authors analyse, scrutinize and (dis)cover relevant discourses, which, taken together, shed light on the complexity of historical and socio-cultural issues which Ireland is still coming to terms with. By doing so, it simultaneously provides new interpretative keys to facilitate the understanding of contemporary realities in all emergent countries struggling with identity formation.

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