

THE IRISH LANGUAGE AND THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM¹

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As evidenced in a number of recent public debates about Irish, the arguments about freedom and choice are often used by those who wish to limit the state support for the language in Ireland. Yet, one can use the same arguments to support the need to protect Irish and other endangered languages. The article first examines the philosophical underpinnings of the Irish language revival and concludes that one can read the legacy of thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder not only as conducive to nationalism and language determinism, but as having an emancipatory and “ecological” potential. The article then examines the connection between Irish and various notions of personal freedom in Irish-language literature since the revival. The twentieth-century authors discussed include Pádraic Ó Conaire, Micheál mac Liammóir, Brian Ó Nualláin, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, and Seán Ó Ríordáin. The last part of the article analyses Dave Duggan’s recent novel Makaronik, which takes the connection between language diversity and the freedom of choice as its central theme.

In the long-standing debates about the status of Irish as an obligatory subject on the school curriculum, arguments about freedom and choice abound. This was made explicit already in the late 1960s in the name of the pressure group the Language Freedom Movement that campaigned, with partial success, against the government support of Irish in the education system. Similar arguments have been used in the recent debate about the place of Irish on the Leaving Certificate. On the surface, the arguments do hold – the student or parent, indeed, has more freedom if they are not limited in their choice by the obligatory status of certain subjects dictated by state policy. On second thought, however, it is clear that

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some distortion is at play here. After all, education as such always contains an element of compulsion – indeed, the child is *obliged* to go to school. Provided that the education system works well, this compulsion should result in an enhancement of freedom for the citizen – it need not be emphasized that with good education, the individual has a greater choice of available career paths, can enjoy a wider range of cultural artefacts, and has more possibilities of spending free time. In Ireland, mathematics has an even stronger obligatory status than Irish, yet nobody has used the arguments of freedom to weaken the position of mathematics in the system.

This particular fact can be explained by a utilitarian preference for the sciences over humanities, but there are clearly other factors connected specifically to Irish. As a language revived, with partial success, by patriotic enthusiasts at the turn of the twentieth century, Irish has been long associated with nationalism. Moreover, as the support of Irish (although often purely symbolic) was a component of the conservative ideology that dominated independent Ireland at least until the 1960s, the language has been associated by some with oppressive features of that state, which included, e.g., the censorship of publications or a ban on divorce. In the thought of certain intellectuals, therefore, a turn from Irish to English entailed a movement from nationalism and conservatism towards cosmopolitanism and liberalism. In order to examine this position, it is worth first turning our attention to the philosophical underpinnings of the whole concept of language revival.

Theoretical Considerations

As is widely known, the connection between language and nation is largely the legacy of German pre-Romantic and Romantic thinkers that inspired language revivals all across Europe. Already Johann Gottfried Herder equalled language with the heart and soul (*Herz und Seele*) of a people.² Even more strongly, Wilhelm von Humboldt located the basis of language in the “spirit of the race” (*Geist des Volkes*) and proposed that in every language there resides a specific “world view” (*Weltansicht*).³ He espoused a rather radical version of language

² Johann Gottfried Herder, “Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität,” *J.G. von Herder’s ausgewählte Werke in einem Bande* (Stuttgart und Tübingen: J.W. Gottascher Verlag, 1844) 1122. The discussion of Herder and Humboldt here largely draws on my article “The Prison of Language: Brian O’Nolan, *An Béal Bocht*, and Language Determinism,” *The Parish Review*, 4.1 (2018): 29-38.

³ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, ed. Michael Losonsky, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 32, 60.

determinism: “[...] this connection of the individual with his nation lies right at the centre from whence the total mental power determines all thinking, feeling and willing. For language is related to everything therein, to the whole as to the individual, and nothing of this ever is, or remains, alien to it.”⁴

It seems that there is little space for human freedom in this view – the individual’s belonging to a collective, an ethnic group or a nation, through the medium of language largely determines his or her manner of thought. Reviving a language, propagating it through the education system, might be considered a means of tying individuals to a specific collective, a particular *Weltansicht*, and thus limiting their range of choices.

However, this view does not take into account the phenomenon of bilingualism and multilingualism, the possibility that more languages (and thus more thought systems) are available to the individual and that they can interact with each other. Herder and Humboldt did not really take this possibility into account, yet it seems to be an unacknowledged consequence of their philosophy. Another issue that is at stake is the imbalance between languages in terms of power. After all, the German philosophers were not the first to formulate the position of language determinism and the connection between language and nation. Already in 1596, English poet Edmund Spenser lamented the adoption of Irish by the descendants of the Anglo-Norman conquerors of Ireland: “Soe that the speach being Irish, the hart must needes be Irishe; for out of the aboundance of the hart, the tonge speaketh.”⁵ The Irish language thus, in his view, clearly posed a threat to England’s imperialist ambitions. It is also worth bearing in mind that Herder’s most famous formulation of the language-nation connection was a reaction to Joseph II’s Germanizing policies within the Austrian empire. He strongly disagreed with them, very much in contrast with Spenser’s imperial attitude:

Hat wohl ein Volk, zumal ein unkultiviertes Volk, etwas lieberes als die Sprache seiner Väter? In ihr wohnt sein ganzer Gedankenreichtum an Tradition, Geschichte, Religion und Grundsätzen des Lebens, alle sein Herz und Seele. Einem solchen Volk seine Sprache nehmen oder herabwürdigen heißt ihm sein einziges unsterbliches Eigentum nehmen, das von Eltern auf Kinder fortgeht.⁶

⁴ Humboldt 42.

⁵ Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (Dublin: Hybernia Press, 1809) 112.

⁶ Herder 1112. All translations from German or Irish in this article are my own unless specified otherwise.

Is anything more precious for a people, especially an uncultivated people, than the speech of their fathers? Within it dwells the whole wealth of thought on tradition, history, religion and the principles of life, all of the people's heart and soul. To take away their language from such a people or to derogate it means depriving them of their only immortal possession, passed on from parents to children.

Herder's plea here clearly counters the Emperor's effort to impose one language on all his subjects, in order to make the running of the empire smoother. In contrast with mainstream Enlightenment thought that emphasized unity, Herder shows that there is value in diversity as well – diversity of language and thought. Not without reason has his view been labelled, by the historian Joep Leerssen, as ecological.⁷

The totalitarian systems of the twentieth century brought “linguistic imperialism” to a wholly new level – a possibility opened that the state, by manipulating language, would be able to control the very thoughts of its inhabitants. This threat was thematized by a number of thinkers and writers. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the ruling party invents its own language, “newspeak,” whose purpose is explicitly to “narrow the range of thought.”⁸ The creators of newspeak proceed by reducing vocabulary, getting rid of “vagueness and [...] useless shades of meaning,”⁹ until the imposition of this new form of speech on party members makes “thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.”¹⁰ Another such language, in much more absurd circumstances, appears in Václav Havel's play *Vyrozumění* (The Memorandum, 1965). This language, “ptydepe,” is introduced in an unnamed bureaucratic institution, again in order to get rid of ambiguities, emotional connotations, and misleading similarities between words. The language, created on scientific principles, is supposed to make the institution's work more efficient, but the attempt ends in a mesh of bureaucratic absurdities reminiscent of Franz Kafka's work.¹¹ On a more theoretical level, Michel Foucault wrote in 1969 about discourse in general as a largely impersonal construct, whose rules, set down by the governing ideology, allow little room for freedom.¹²

⁷ Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) 99.

⁸ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Books, 2013) 60.

⁹ Orwell 60.

¹⁰ Orwell 60.

¹¹ Václav Havel, *Vyrozumění: hra o dvanácti obrazech* (Praha: Dilia, 1965).

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2001) 211.

One may argue, however, that the more language diversity there exists, the less successful such manipulations of language must be. This idea is made explicit in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian philosopher and literary critic whose creative life was spent under the shadow of Stalinism. In the essay "Discourse in the Novel" he describes, in general terms, so-called authoritative discourse, a language "sharply demarcated, compact and inert" that "strives [...] to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior."¹³ This monolith is opposed to the world of heteroglossia, whose governing principle is diversity: in the novel, but also in life in general, different language variants, based on class, profession, age, or simply individual preference, freely interact, mirror, and mock each other. While Bakhtin defines heteroglossia within the realm of a single national language, there is no reason not to broaden the definition so that it includes the interaction between regional dialects or different languages. The principal idea stays intact, i.e., that language diversity stands in opposition to authoritative, monolithic discourse.

Seen through modern eyes, there are therefore two principal ways of interpreting Herder's legacy – one that emphasizes language determinism and the language-nation connection, and an alternative one that highlights the emancipatory and "ecological" potential of Herder's philosophy. In Irish-language discourse, the connection between language and nation has always been strong. It has been one of the principal motivating forces of the language movement since its beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century. And it cannot be denied that to a degree, some articulation of this connection is necessary if a language is to be revived on a geographical basis – such endeavour clearly requires a shared persuasion that there is a historical or communal link between the language and the given area.

It may be argued that some nationalists, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, placed too much emphasis on the language-nation connection, equating Irish with a world view (*pace* Humboldt) that they created themselves: a world view that comprised isolationism, simple country life, and narrow-minded religious faith.¹⁴ Yet there have always been voices that linked the language with various notions of personal freedom. In 2015, critic Barry

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008) 343, 342.

¹⁴ Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881-1921: Ideology and Innovation* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) 14-16, 33-37 and *passim*.

McCrea established a theoretical framework that helps to understand this possibly surprising connection. In his award-winning monograph *Languages of the Night* he endeavours to explain why some modernist authors, in Ireland and elsewhere, opted for minority languages or rural dialects as means of expression, although they were not native speakers of these. The decision seems, at first sight, illogical, as it is bound to radically limit the number of potential readers. McCrea compares the choice of the writers in question to “white martyrdom,” a practice of Irish medieval monks who severed all links with their homes and led an itinerant life in the service of God.¹⁵ But, paradoxically, the writers’ motivation was, in McCrea’s view, precisely the search for home, in a linguistic sense.

McCrea starts with a presupposition that even one’s native language does not allow for a proper expression of the self. Being inherited from other people, it is, in a sense, as foreign to the individual as all the other languages.¹⁶ This reasoning chimes with Wilhelm von Humboldt’s comparison of the small power of the individual compared to the overwhelming power of language:

When we think how the current generation of a people is governed by all that their language has undergone, through all the preceding centuries, and how only the power of the single generation impinges thereon – and this not even purely, since those coming up and those departing live mingled side by side – it then becomes evident how small, in fact, is the power of the individual compared to the might of language.¹⁷

McCrea argues that minority languages offered some authors a tentative escape from this “tyranny” of the native language, a possibility for formulating inner thoughts, for artistic expression, even for modernist experimentation. They offered an alternative sense of home, albeit always elusive at the same time.¹⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that such languages have attracted individuals who, for various reasons, felt at odds with the mainstream society of their times. McCrea mentions the Irish writer Brendan Behan and the Italian poet Pier Paolo Pasolini, who shared a minority sexual orientation, as well as the Irish poet Seán Ó Ríordáin, a recluse suffering from tuberculosis for most of his life. Some of these

¹⁵ Barry McCrea, *Languages of the Night: Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination in Twentieth-Century Ireland and Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015) 17-18.

¹⁶ McCrea 29.

¹⁷ Humboldt 63.

¹⁸ McCrea 67-68.

authors, McCrea argues, were committed cultural nationalists, but cultural nationalism was not their primary motivation.¹⁹

Examples from Twentieth-century Irish-language Literature

The following part of the article lists examples of authors who, in various ways, emphasized the link between the Irish language and personal and artistic freedom, as well as notions of plurality and diversity. The list is, by necessity, far from being exhaustive, but includes some of the most notable Irish-language authors from the revival period until the present.

Arguably the most accomplished prose writer of the early revival was Pádraic Ó Conaire (1882-1928). He can be described as a late Romantic whose very life was an embodiment of a radical search for freedom – he abandoned his studies for the priesthood, emigrated to London, and later left a steady job in the British civil service to lead an itinerant life in Ireland right until his untimely death.²⁰ In his essays “An tSaoirse” (Freedom, 1918) and “Saoirse Phearsanta” (Personal Freedom, 1918), published at the height of Ireland’s struggle for independence, he argues that national self-determination is merely a necessary prerequisite for economic, and even more importantly, personal freedom, which he describes as “barr agus coróin na saoirse” [the summit and crown of freedom].²¹ Ó Conaire’s allegorical short story “Ná Lig sin i gCathú” (Lead Us Not into Temptation, 1914) is largely an exploration of artistic freedom.²² The protagonist is a sculptor who at first lives a hermit’s life in the forest, concentrating on his masterpiece. A meeting with a mysterious woman – who symbolizes the world with both its beauties and temptations – initially leads to the improvement of his work. However, the woman’s desire for worldly riches makes the sculptor abandon his secluded life and enter the service of a king, whose demands eventually lead the artist to compromising his vision.

The story might be criticized for its misogynistic slant, but at the same time amounts to a radical (and paradoxical) statement of artistic independence. The minority language made such statements even more pronounced – the nascent Irish-language literature with its limited readership was seen as an opportunity

¹⁹ McCrea 83, 107.

²⁰ I have discussed Ó Conaire’s Romanticism in “John Millington Synge and Pádraic Ó Conaire: Unexpected Fellow Travellers between Romanticism, Realism and Beyond,” *AUC Philologica: Prague Studies in English*, 1 (2016): 55-68.

²¹ Gearóid Denvir (ed.), *Aistí Phádraic Uí Chonaire* (Indreabhán: Cló Chois Fharráige, 1978) 98.

²² Pádraic Ó Conaire, “Ná Lig Sinn i gCathú,” *Scothscéalta* (Dublin: Sairséal Ó Marcaigh, 1982) 44-51.

by Ó Conaire to develop an original style with little regard to the expectations of society. At the same time, Ó Conaire was far from being a romantic dreamer and was firmly aware of the practical difficulties such an approach might imply for the writer. In his journalism, he often argued that the necessary material conditions should be created for the development of original Irish-language literature. He deplored the dependence of writers on the market of learners and schoolchildren and argued for schemes of financial support that would enable the production of high quality works even if the potential readership of such was small indeed.²³

One of Pádraic Ó Conaire's personal friends was the English-born actor, playwright, director, and illustrator Alfred Wilmore (1899-1978). Wilmore adopted an Irish identity while in his teens, learned Irish and changed his name to Micheál mac Liammóir.²⁴ His main motivation was clearly not patriotism, but the search for artistic and personal opportunities. The Irish language offered him a home at a period of personal crisis – at the time when he realized his minority sexual orientation and had to make important choices concerning his future career. His case is therefore directly comparable to the authors discussed by Barry McCrea. He remained faithful to his adopted linguistic home until the end of his life and incessantly promoted ideas of freedom within Irish-language discourse. In his numerous essays he clashed with narrow-minded revivalists and defended artistic freedom as the most important source of the wished-for revival.²⁵ His arguments for the promotion of the Irish language were far removed from any kind of chauvinism. He defended the retaining of national specifics, including language, as an antidote against assimilation, cultural entropy, and the dominance of stronger cultures over weak ones. He stated his point as follows:

²³ See, for instance, Pádraic Ó Conaire, "Ridireacht Nua: An bhfuil Míle Léitheoir le Fáil?" *Denvir* 80-81; "Scribhneoirí agus a gcuid Oibre: An Easpa Misnigh atá orthu?" *Denvir* 165-68; "Lucht Peann faoin Saorstát," *Denvir* 177-79.

²⁴ The discussion of Micheál mac Liammóir here draws on my article "Micheál mac Liammóir, the Irish Language and the Idea of Freedom," *A Stage of Emancipation*, ed. Marguéríte Corporaal and Ruud van den Beuken (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, forthcoming).

²⁵ See, for example, Micheál mac Liammóir, "An tSaoirse: Sglábhúocht Aigne in Éirinn," *Misneach*, 18 December 1920: 10-11; "Saoirse na hEaladhna: Cad is Pagántacht ann?" *Misneach*, 5 February 1921: 5; "Lucht Ealadhna agus an Tír-Grádh," *An Sguab*, 12 September 1923: 233-34.

[...] an bealach is fearr chun comhcheol dhéanamh as an saol seo, do réir mar thuigimse é, ní hé na rudaí is treise ghríosú chun na rudaí is laige scrios, ach chur ina luí orthu go bhfuil siad go léir ann, go bhfuil difríocht eatarthu, ach nach gá d'aon cheann orthu cheapadh go bhfuil sé níos fearr ná an ceann eile, ná níos fiúntaí, ná níos spioradálta. Tá difríocht eatarthu: sin an méid.²⁶

[...] the best way to create harmony in this world, in my own understanding, is not to encourage the big things to destroy the weak, but to persuade them that all exist, that there is difference among them, but that none of them needs to think that it is better than any other, or worthier, or more spiritual. There is difference among them: that's all.

As an Irish-language theatre practitioner, mac Liammóir followed Ó Conaire in imagining the minority status of the language and the resulting small audience numbers as a unique opportunity. In commenting on the small demand for Irish-language theatre, he argued:

Sí Éire an t-aon tír san Eoraip inniu, déarfainn, a bhfuil teanga aici a bhfuil a muintir féin chomh aineolach uirthi nach gá di dul ar a dhá glúin rompu más mian léi dráma maith léiriú sa teangain sin. An pobal an ea? Agus an Rud Theastaíos ón bPobal? Níl aon phobal againn go fóill, mar tuigtear an focal i dtíortha eile. Táimid go mall ag iarraidh ceann dhéanamh dúinn féin. Féachaimis chuige mar sin go dtosnóimid láithreach ag oiliúint a bhfuil againn cheana chun spéis agus suim chur sna rudaí a bhfuil dóchas againn féin astu, sna rudaí a chreidimid bheith go maith.²⁷

Ireland is the only country in Europe today, I would say, with a language that its own people are so ignorant of that one does not need to kneel before them in order to produce a good play in it. The people? And their demands? We don't have any audience as yet, as the word is understood in other countries. We are slowly building one. Let us start immediately to educate whatever audience there is to get interested in things we place hope in, in things that we believe are good.

²⁶ Micheál mac Liammóir, *Ceo Meala Lá Seaca* (Dublin: Sairséal agus Dill, 1952) 290.

²⁷ Mac Liammóir, *Ceo Meala Lá Seaca* 239-40.

He argued that if this opportunity is taken proper advantage of, Irish-language drama may not only thrive, but eventually make a significant contribution to the culture of the whole world. While this particular vision has, due to practical difficulties, not yet really materialized, mac Liammóir's thoughts still remain an important source of inspiration.

The novelist and journalist Brian Ó Nualláin (1911-1966), better known under his *nome de plume* Flann O'Brien, was firmly aware of the dangers of determinism, contained in the philosophies underlying the Irish language revival.²⁸ His only novel in Irish, *An Béal Bocht* (1941), takes language determinism to its extremes. It features a fictional Gaeltacht where all locals act according to the clichés imposed on them by authors of second-rate rural novels, while becoming the object of study of hypocritical language enthusiasts from the city. For all its exuberant humour, the novel portrays a world that is hellish in nature – riddled with poverty and bad weather, and full of disasters and physical pain. The fact that the world is wholly constructed by language means that there is no escape from it – the only character that is saved, in a certain way, is the beggar Sitric, who renounces human language and human company altogether and opts for a life in the sea among the seals.²⁹

Brian Ó Nualláin clearly feared that Irish itself could become an authoritative, monolithic language if it was left in the care of narrow-minded revivalists. At the same time, his columns in *The Irish Times* reveal that he understood the value of Irish. In words that chime with the above-quoted opinion of mac Liammóir's, he argued:

There is probably no basis at all for the theory that a people cannot preserve a separate national entity without a distinct language but it is beyond dispute that Irish enshrines the national ethos and in a subtle way Irish persists very vigorously in English. In advocating the preservation of Irish culture, it is not to be inferred that this culture is superior to the English or any other but simply that certain Irish modes are more comfortable and suitable for Irish people; otherwise these modes simply would not exist.³⁰

²⁸ The discussion of Brian Ó Nualláin here draws on Markus, "The Prison of Language."

²⁹ Myles na gCopaleen, *An Béal Bocht* (Dublin: An Press Náisiúnta, 1941) 86.

³⁰ Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn,'* ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Picador, 1977) 283.

While Ó Nualláin defends the language-nation connection here, he does it in a very careful manner in order to avoid the chauvinism of more narrow-minded revivalists. The mention of the influence of Irish on English also implies that he imagined Irish as a part of a bilingual, dialogic, pluralistic environment. The column continues in a jocular manner: “[...] if Irish were to die completely, the standard of English here [...] would sink to a level probably so low as that obtaining in England and it would stop there only because it could go no lower.”³¹ Yet the statement contains an important truth very relevant to the argument of this article: for a language to retain its vitality and versatility, it has to be constantly invigorated by contact with other languages. Monoliths such as newspeak, ptydepe, or Bakhtin’s authoritative discourse, fall invariably victim to simplification, impoverishment, and entropy.

The contrast between authoritative discourse and freedom, enabled by language diversity, is crucial in the work of the arguably best Irish-language prose writer ever, Máirtín Ó Cadhain (1906-1970). As a staunch nationalist and an IRA member in his youth, Ó Cadhain often defended the language-nation connection in very traditional terms, embracing, at times, the ethnocentric view.³² Simultaneously, however, he developed a keen interest in various minority languages in Europe, but also on other continents. He was particularly worried by the homogenizing efforts of empires that “dread anything heterogeneous, anything that could spring to life, to self-assertion, at any future stage.”³³ He specifically criticized the British and French tendency to build nuclear rocket bases in Celtic-speaking regions, thus connecting the widespread fear of nuclear disaster with the fear of the destruction of language diversity.³⁴

In his work, one often encounters a contrast between monolithic, authoritative discourse on one side and a plethora of forms of language, or even different languages, on the other. This can be easily seen in his most famous work, the novel *Cré na Cille* (Graveyard Clay, 1949).³⁵ Set in a Connemara graveyard during the Second World War, the novel is a cacophony of voices of about thirty nine characters buried there over a period of thirty one years. While the bulk of the text is written in the author’s native dialect, it is extremely

³¹ O’Brien 283.

³² Máirtín Ó Cadhain, “Náisiún na hÉireann – Céard é?” Unpublished lecture delivered on 27 and 28 July 1966, Trinity College Archives, TCD 10878/M/2/24, 10-21.

³³ Máirtín Ó Cadhain, Lecture about the author’s visit of Kirghizia, delivered on November 1962, Trinity College Archives, TCD 10878/M/2/29, 3.

³⁴ Ó Cadhain, Lecture about the author’s visit of Kirghizia, 2.

³⁵ The discussion of the novel here draws on my article “The Carnavalesque against Entropy: Máirtín Ó Cadhain’s *Cré na Cille*,” *Litteraria Pragensia*, 28.55 (2018): 56-69.

variegated in terms of style and register. Various folk genres are interwoven in the text, along with idiosyncratic turns of phrase of the characters, diverse kinds of literary Irish, as well as passages in French, English, German, and Breton. To this heteroglossic orchestra, a single voice of the so-called “Stoc na Cille” (Trumpet of the Graveyard) is opposed, periodically announcing the victory of death and decay over the forces of life and growth. The voice often asserts its authority in lofty, poetic words full of Biblical echoes: “Is mise Stoc na Cille! Éistear le mo ghlór! Caithfear éisteacht!” [I am the Trump of the Graveyard. Let my voice be heard! It must be heard!]³⁶ Yet, the characters do not pay the slightest attention to it and the voice eventually dwindles and all but disappears by the end of the novel. Although the characters remain trapped in the otherworld of the graveyard, heteroglossia celebrates a tentative victory over authoritative discourse.

Similarly, in Ó Cadhain’s novella “An Eochair” (The Key, 1967), featuring a subaltern civil servant accidentally trapped in his office, the meaningless and absurd language of state bureaucracy is juxtaposed to the much more varied and earthy speech of a number of characters in the text.³⁷ While bureaucracy clearly wins the day at the end, the variety of language forms present in the story shows that it necessarily does not have to be the case and that the possibility of regaining freedom through the creative possibilities of (diversified) language is retained.

Seán Ó Ríordáin (1916-1977) is considered one of the most important modernist Irish-language poets. He was raised through English, although his father was a native speaker of Irish and the family lived in a partly Irish-speaking area of Baile Bhuirne. His relationship to the language, as evidenced from his diaries and his poetry, was fraught with misgivings concerning his ability to speak it “naturally” and his access to the native tradition.³⁸ In the poem “A Theanga seo Leath Liom” (O Language Half-Mine, 1964), he imagined the language as “tearmann” [sanctuary], yet he doubted his right to fully inhabit it, as a person positioned between two languages and two cultures, Irish and English.³⁹ At occasions he connected the concept of a sanctuary with a real

³⁶ Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2009) 82. The translation is taken from Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016) 66.

³⁷ Máirtín Ó Cadhain, “An Eochair,” *An tSraith ar Lár* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2009) 205-60.

³⁸ McCrea 79, 82-83.

³⁹ Seán Ó Ríordáin, “A Theanga Seo Leath-Liom,” *Scáthán Véarsaí* (Dublin: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1980) 85.

geographical location, the stronghold of Irish in the parish of Dún Chaoin, which he regularly visited.⁴⁰ His misgivings could be partly ascribed to the discourse of cultural nationalism, which stressed the concept of purity and saw external influences on the language as detrimental. In some of his poems, such as “Fill Arís” (Return Again, 1964), he seems to subscribe, to a certain degree, to such a narrow version of cultural nationalism.⁴¹

Yet he was able to turn his intermediary position to his advantage, enriching Irish-language poetry with poetic techniques and thoughts that had never occurred in it before. He outlined his position in his crucial essay “Teangacha Príobháideacha” (Private Languages, 1963). His starting point is similar to Bakhtin’s, stressing the diversity within a seemingly unitary language, from regional dialects down to languages of families and individuals.⁴² On the one hand, Ó Ríordáin argues that beyond this diversity there exists an abstract, “Platonic” unity, which he calls, in a manner reminiscent of Herder, “meanma Ghaeilge na hÉireann” [the spirit of Irish] (13). On the other hand, he clearly objects to the actual unifying force that the community exercises on the individual, urging him or her to conform linguistically (14). Rather, he stresses the importance of “private languages” used by specific individuals, most notably “filí móra, scríbhneoirí móra próis, agus daoine buile” [great poets, great prose writers, and madmen] to express (usually in writing) their inner thoughts while at a remove from the bustle of life (15, 17). These private languages give these individuals the power to express themselves independently from others, but at the same time, contribute to the richness of the abstract “meanma.” With his own case in mind, Ó Ríordáin stresses the ability of non-native speakers to create such private literary languages, using the example of John the Evangelist, whom he believed to be a second-language speaker of Greek (18-19). These private

⁴⁰ McCrea 111-12.

⁴¹ Ó Ríordáin, *Scáthán Véarsaí* 96. The poem is most commonly read as an exhortation of the reader to forget about “sibhialtacht an Bhéarla” [English civilization] and to return to the prelapsarian world of Irish, still alive in the Irish-speaking parish of Dún Chaoin. Yet, it can be interpreted also in more subtle ways, as Barry McCrea and Daniela Theinová have suggested. See McCrea 113-20, and Daniela Theinová, “‘Faobhar na faille siar’: Seán Ó Ríordáin agus Filí Comhaimseartha na Gaeilge ar Thóir na Teanga,” *Ar an Imeall i Lár an Domhain: Ag Trasnú Tairseacha Staire, Teanga, Litríochta agus Cultúir*, ed. Radvan Markus, Éadaoin Ní Mhuircheartaigh, Máirín Nic Eoin, Deirdre Nic Mhathúna, Brian Ó Conchubhair, and Pádraig Ó Liatháin (Indreabhán: Leabhar Breac, forthcoming in 2021).

⁴² Seán Ó Ríordáin, “Teangacha príobháideacha,” *Scríobh*, 4 (1979): 13-14. Subsequent page references will be given in the text in parentheses.

languages are an invigorating force, inserting new possibilities into the larger whole when it deteriorates due to the homogenizing effect of common usage. As Ó Ríordáin words it, “Maolaítear teanga de réir mar a leathnaítear a húsáid.” [Language becomes blunt as its use widens.] (19) Diversity, embodied here in private languages, is thus yet again presented an antidote to entropy.

Dave Duggan’s *Makaronik*: A Recent Example

The connection between the Irish language and personal freedom is definitely not a matter of the past century only. In an intriguing manner, many of the themes that have been discussed so far found their articulation in Dave Duggan’s recent science fiction novel *Makaronik*. The novel was published in 2018, but is ultimately based on an eponymous play first staged by the Belfast troupe Aisling Ghéar in 2014. The story is set in the year 2584, which is clearly a deliberate allusion to George Orwell’s famous novel. The world is imagined as distinctly dystopic at that time, ruthlessly governed by an unspecified, possibly interplanetary, Empire. The Empire manages outposts in various parts of the globe, whose names, such as Dakar or Kuching, evoke the history of colonialism.

The novel’s title, *Makaronik*, refers to the name of the central character, who, as a low-ranking officer of the Empire, manages one of these outposts placed in what used to be Derry in Northern Ireland. In addition, the term “macaronic” denotes multilingual texts, thus introducing the central theme of the novel, the diversity of languages. Not only does the central character frequently sing macaronic songs from the Irish tradition, combining lines in Irish with lines in English or Latin, but the novel as such functions as a macaronic text par excellence. Most of it is written in Irish, but part of the conversation takes place also in English, and there are lines in German, French, Spanish, Latin, Hiberno-English, Ulster Scots, and even Wolof scattered throughout the text. In addition, the Empire’s own language, Empirish, is an important presence in the novel. The language was invented by the author and betrays the influence of Orwell’s newspeak as well as, to some degree, Burgess’s nadsat.⁴³ In essence, Empirish is English simplified to its very bones, spoken in short, staccato sentences and frequently using reduplication as a lexical device. It is a principal means through which the Empire exercises control and like newspeak, serves to eradicate

⁴³ Dave Duggan explicitly mentioned these sources in an advertisement article for the play. See Dave Duggan, “Makaronik,” *culture northernireland.org*, 15 October 2014, <https://www.culturenorthernireland.org/features/performing-arts/makaronik> (accessed 12 March 2020).

concepts that could endanger the Empire's hegemony, such as "choice" or even "future." And it is precisely the concept of choice that is of central concern in the novel, highlighted even on the cover with the question "Rogha? Cad é sin?" [Choice? What is it?].

Part of the Empire's strategy is the elimination of other languages and cultures in order to defend its power.

Le bheith slán ann fhéin bhí ar an Impireacht na teangacha is na cultúir uilig a scriosadh nó a shrianú nó a chur faoi ghlas le cinntiú [...] nach mbeadh cuimhne ag éinne ar a dhath ar bith ach inniu, sa dóigh nach mbeadh stair ar fáil, gan snáithe ar bith de, díreach ná cam.⁴⁴

In order to be safe the Empire had to destroy, restrain or incarcerate all languages and cultures so that nobody would remember anything apart from today, so that there would be no history, any thread of it, straight or crooked.

This is clearly a part of the reasoning that lies behind the creation of Empirish, a radical departure from natural languages, which embody their own history in their structure and vocabulary. A similar goal was pursued by the creators of newspeak in Orwell's novel. As the party slogan in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* says: "Who controls the past [...] controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."⁴⁵

While the setting in the future allows for an easier discussion of abstract concepts, in various ways connections are made with history and the contemporary world. It is made clear, for example, that the Empire is suffering from an "economic and immigration crisis" (an ghéarchéim eacnamaíochta agus imirce), and has to make cuts in its budget, which is a clear reference to the crises that the Western world has suffered in the new millennium (48). Various references are also made to powerful states of the past, such as the Roman and the British Empire. The setting in Derry works as a connecting device between the "realistic" and "science-fiction" level of the novel. Just as it now exists on the margins of what was left of the British Empire, it is imagined as lying on the

⁴⁴ Dave Duggan, *Makaronik* (An Spidéal: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2018) 96. Subsequent page references will be given in the text in parentheses.

⁴⁵ Orwell 40.

margins of the seemingly omnipotent Empire of the twenty-sixth century.⁴⁶ The marginal position, however, turns out not as a disadvantage, but as a source of disruptive power (91). As an ironic nod to contemporary concerns, the conflict in Northern Ireland, existing at present for more than four hundred years, is not imagined to have been resolved even in the distant future. The city of Derry is described, in Empirish, in the following way: “Doire. Derry. Londonderry. Ireland urbanurban. Empire British. Strife Process. Century Twenty. Outcomes pending” (31).

In 2584, the rulers of the Empire believe that they have dealt with more powerful languages, such as English, French, or Spanish, that used to have imperial status in history. It seems that only minor languages, such as Irish, exist in one form or another. Nevertheless, the Empire fears “loose threads” of any kind – even possibilities contained in powerless languages posit a threat to the hegemonic way of thinking represented by the Empire (15). The final elimination of Irish is the task with which two middle-ranking officers, Diarmuid and Gráinne, are sent to the outpost in Derry. As the city itself had been (most probably) abandoned, this is a seemingly easy task of collecting all the data related to the language, its history and culture, and sending it to the unspecified centre of the Empire. After the completion of this task, they are ordered to take Makaronik with them and close the outpost for good.

On the formal level, the novel betrays the fact that it was based on a script for a play – most of it consists of dialogue between the three characters. The character of Makaronik represents the possibilities of choice offered by language diversity and acts as a catalyst for change. Contrary to the information given by the rulers to Diarmuid and Gráinne, she does not speak Irish only, but also a number of other languages considered safely dead by the Empire. Secretly, she maintains an archive of these languages, thus challenging the Empire’s hegemony. In addition, she is fluent in Empirish, a skill that is forbidden to low-ranking officers of her kind. Her goal is to prevent the closing of the outpost and protect the cultural richness that she has managed to gather. Eventually, she wins the Empire’s officers to her side, using her power of persuasion as well as the direct emotional appeal of the macaronic songs that she sings.

The names of the officers allude to the Irish medieval romance *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne) similar in plot

⁴⁶ This point is made in Pól Ó Muirí, “LÉIRMHEAS: Ba chuma an in Empirish, i mBéarla nó i nGaeilge é, saothar dea-scríofa samhlaíoch é Makaronik,” *Tuairisc.ie*, 28 January 2019, <https://tuairisc.ie/leirmheas-ba-chuma-an-in-empirish-i-mbearla-no-i-ngaeilge-e-saothar-dea-scrifoa-samhlaioch-e-makaronik> (accessed 12 March 2020).

to the better known Tristan and Iseult story. The High King's daughter, Gráinne, is betrothed to the aging army leader, Fionn mac Cumhaill, but on the night of the wedding forces one of Fionn's retainers, the handsome Diarmuid, to elope with her. Most of the ensuing romance consists of the flight of the lovers through various places in Ireland, pursued by the enraged Fionn. Like the heroes of the romance, also the officers in the novel are lovers, having consummated their relationship against the orders of the Empire while on their previous mission in Dakar. Moreover, the Diarmuid of the novel finds himself in a similar conflict of loyalties as Fionn's retainer, torn between his obligations to the Empire and to Gráinne. As transpires towards the end of the novel, Gráinne is expecting a child, which, according to the laws of the Empire, she is not allowed to give birth to.

Makaronik's influence helps them to find a way out of this impasse, a way uncertain in its outcome, but offering a ray of hope. They gradually realize that they appreciate the creative possibilities of natural languages, Irish as well as English. Diarmuid, almost unwittingly, composes a line of poetry in Irish after hearing one of the Makaronik's songs and on various occasions engages in wordplay along with Gráinne (20, 47). Both enjoy "a bheith ag spraoi leis an teanga" [to toy with language] (32). They also realize that like their namesakes from the romance, they are in search of "tearmann" [sanctuary], and "baile" [home] (92 and *passim*). The world of Empirish, impersonal and bound by orders, cannot offer such, while languages like Irish can. They learn the meaning of "choice" and finally make one – Gráinne decides to stay in Derry with Makaronik and give birth to their child, while Diarmuid, in a gesture of self-sacrifice, departs back to the centre to smooth over matters with the rulers. The ultimate goal is to create a society in Derry similar to the one that was formed in Dakar when Diarmuid and Gráinne last disobeyed orders: "Daoine ann. Gan sclábháí ar bith. Aicmí éagsúla. Teangacha éagsúla gan barraíocht éagóra." [People there. No slaves. Various classes. Various languages without much injustice.] (117) While the Empire remains still undefeated at the end of the novel, the fact that the outpost is not closed means that Makaronik's archive is not destroyed. Language diversity and the freedom and choice contained therein are therefore preserved for future generations.

Conclusion

The examples listed above amply show that there is a continuous thread in Irish-language literature since the revival that makes a connection between the language (imagined as a part of a multilingual environment) and various notions of personal freedom. Language as an instrument of authority can become a

powerful tyrant, while language diversity may serve as a yet more potent instrument against tyranny. As Brian Ó Nualláin has illustrated, even minority languages such as Irish can develop a tendency to create hegemonic discourses, especially if too much stress is put on the language-nation connection. If this danger is avoided, it is worthwhile to follow Dave Duggan and equate Irish and other languages, major or minor, that do not have imperial ambitions, with hope. As was shown, such languages are a valuable source that contributes to human freedom. They can offer alternative homes to people and provide opportunities for thought and artistic expression. There is dire need for such sources in the contemporary world.