

# Exploring the Portrayal of Institutional Translators and Interpreters in the Republic of Ireland's English-Language Print Media

Antony Hoyte-West

Independent scholar, United Kingdom  
antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4410-6520>

**Abstract.** Although the Republic of Ireland has been a member of the European Union for nearly five decades, the country's first official language, Irish, was only recognised as an official EU language on 1 January 2007. However, a lack of appropriately qualified linguistic personnel means that the language is currently subject to a derogation on its use in the EU institutions, which is scheduled to be lifted in 2022. Interviews conducted previously with interpreters in the Republic of Ireland (Hoyte-West 2020a) noted that practitioners generally viewed media coverage of the derogation as contributing to a positive image of the translational professions within the EU context; however, further research needed to be carried out on the topic. Accordingly, this article looks at how institutional translators and interpreters have been depicted in the Republic of Ireland's English-language print media from 2007 to 2019. Using data obtained through a qualitative content analysis of the country's three major English-language newspapers, an overview of the current situation is provided through analysis of the attitudes and opinions expressed. **Keywords:** status of Irish, institutional translators, institutional interpreters, media portrayal

## ES institucijose dirbančių vertėjų įvaizdžio Airijos Respublikos anglakalbėje žiniasklaidoje tyrimas

**Santrauka.** Nors Airijos Respublika yra Europos Sąjungos narė jau beveik penki dešimtmečiai, šalies pirmoji oficialioji kalba – airių – pripažinta ir oficialiaja ES kalba tik 2007 m. sausio 1 d. Vis dėlto dėl nepakankamo tinkamos kvalifikacijos airių kalbos vertėjų skaičiaus kol kas airių kalbos vartojimui ES institucijose taikoma išimtis. Ją numatoma panaikinti 2022 m. Anksčiau vykdyti interviu su konferencijų vertėjais Airijos Respublikoje (Hoyte-West 2020a) atskleidė, kad šios išimties taikymo pristatymą žiniasklaidoje vertėjai vertino kaip teigiamą, prisidedantį prie vertėjų profesijos įvaizdžio ES kontekste stiprinimo, tačiau siekiant tai patvirtinti tyrimą reikėjo tęsti. Šis straipsnis skirtas išsiaiškinti, kaip ES institucijų vertėjai raštu ir žodžiu buvo pristatomi Airijos Respublikos anglakalbėje spaudoje 2007–2019 m. Remiantis turinio kokybinės analizės duomenimis, surinktais iš trijų didžiausių anglų kalba leidžiamų laikraščių, straipsnyje pristatoma dabartinės padėties apžvalga ir spaudoje išreikštų požiūrių ir nuomonių analizė.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** airių kalba, airių kalbos statusas, institucijų vertėjai, airių kalbos įvaizdis

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the sociological turn in translation and interpreting studies has placed practitioners – that is, translators and interpreters themselves – as objects of scholarly interest (Chesterman 2009; Angelelli 2014). Despite the enduring presence of translators and interpreters throughout recorded history, practitioners commonly do not have the widespread legal protections and stringent certification requirements afforded to other professional groups. As such, issues of visibility and prestige have been the subject of wider curiosity across the translational professions, with associated studies on professional status carried out in countries including Denmark (Dam & Zethsen 2008, 2011), Finland (Ruokonen and Mäkisalo 2018), and Vietnam (Hoang 2020), as well as in the European Union (EU) institutions (Dam & Zethsen 2013, 2014) and beyond (Pym, Grin, Sfreddo, and Chan 2013; Gentile 2013). In forming the concluding part of a wider research project on the translation and interpreting professions in the Republic of Ireland (Hoyte-West 2019a, 2020a, 2020b), this study aims to examine the portrayal of institutional translators and interpreters in the country's English-language newspapers, paying specific attention to the impact of official EU status for Irish.

The current study dovetails neatly with rising current interest in the translational professions across the whole island of Ireland (Ní Fhrighil, O'Connor, and Milan 2020; Moorkens 2020). Its genesis arose from a series of interviews on professional status which were conducted with conference interpreters active on the Irish market (Hoyte-West 2020a). The interview findings noted that while practitioners felt that media coverage of official EU status for the Irish language – the first minority language to attain this supranational recognition – had impacted positively on the perception of the wider interpreting profession in the country, further investigation highlighted that additional empirical research on the topic proved to be necessary. As a complement to a similar project conducted by the researcher (Hoyte-West 2020b), which used the same point of departure to analyse coverage of the official EU status for Irish in the Republic of Ireland's three main quality English-language newspapers, it was decided to conduct a further small-scale study to delve into the portrayal of translators and interpreters in this same context.

## Translators, interpreters, and official EU status for Irish

Building on the so-called sociological turn, portrayals of translators and interpreters in the broadcast media, literature, and popular culture have been comparatively well-researched (see for example, Ben Ari 2010; Kaindl and Spitzl 2014; Abend-David

2019). However, and perhaps linked to the uncertain notions of their professional status outlined previously, representations of translators and interpreters in newspapers have attracted less scholarly attention. In the Irish context, though, it is important to mention that previous work has been conducted on portrayals of court interpreters in the news (Phelan 2011).

As a nominally bilingual nation, the Republic of Ireland has a long history of language contact between its two official tongues. Although Irish (*Gaeilge*) has been recognised as the country's first official language, with English in second place, the language has suffered greatly from centuries of marginalisation and denigration vis à vis the political, cultural, and societal dominance of English. Of the 1,761,420 people (39.8% of the country's population) who stated in the 2016 census that they were able to speak Irish, only 73,803 respondents indicated that they spoke Irish on a daily basis; 418,420 Irish speakers noted that they never spoke the language (Central Statistics Office 2020).

As such, the statistics illustrate that despite the significant revitalisation process that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, government efforts to increase the usage of Irish in public life – including relevant translation and interpreting provision – remain a work-in-progress. As alluded to by Ní Fhrighil, O'Connor, and Milan (2020: 134), this legally-mandated bilingualism remains the subject of much debate. Although translation and interpreting have been well-established activities for centuries (see, for example Cronin 1996, 2003; Phelan 2020), the complex historical and socio-political situation of the whole island of Ireland has meant that the country's linguistic map has been in a state of constant flux over the last two centuries (Ní Fhrighil, O'Connor, and Milan 2020: 133).

At this juncture, it is important to note that unlike many European countries, translation and interpreting are not protected professions within the Republic of Ireland. However, there are undergraduate and postgraduate training options for translators offered by universities (ITIA 2020a). In addition, modules in community interpreting are available within undergraduate applied languages degrees at several Irish universities; a postgraduate degree in conference interpreting is also available at NUI Galway. The Irish Translators and Interpreters Association (ITIA) also offers professional certifications via its membership examinations for translators and interpreters (ITIA 2020b), as well as its ITIA Certified Legal Translator credential (ITIA 2020c).

Given the complexities of the current sociolinguistic situation regarding the Irish language, the recognition of Irish at the EU level has brought a number of logistical challenges. Unlike many international organisations, the EU operates on the principle of linguistic equality, and has done so since its foundation (Regulation 1, 1958: 385). As the organisation has expanded to include twenty-four official languages, this commitment to multilingualism has been maintained, leading smaller languages such as

Lithuanian, Maltese, and Slovenian to enjoy equal status to widely-spoken international languages such as English, French, and German. When the Republic of Ireland acceded to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, the country was content to use English for its dealings with Brussels during the first three decades of its membership, with Irish used solely on formal occasions for treaty purposes (Truchot 2003: 103). However, following the accession of Malta to the European Union in 2004 and the associated recognition of Maltese as an official EU language (Hoyte-West 2019b), domestic moves to attain official EU status for Irish gained momentum. In January 2007, Irish became the EU's 23<sup>rd</sup> official language; however, the challenges of finding sufficient Irish-speaking linguists have hampered attempts to implement its full provision in the EU institutions, and hence a derogation remains in place. As such, this legal obligation exempts the EU from providing a complete service in Irish until 1 January 2022. After this date, Irish is scheduled to gain full equality with the EU's 23 other official languages (European Parliament 2018). This includes the requirement to provide the necessary regulations and documentation in the language, as well as ensuring that EU citizens have the right to communicate with the EU institutions in Irish (Regulation 1, 1958). While the EU institutions work towards lifting the derogation, however, a large number of institutional translators and interpreters with Irish language skills are still required (European Commission 2019, 2020).

## Research question and methodology

Taking the overview of translation and interpreting in the Republic of Ireland that was outlined in the previous section, the following research question was posited:

- Building on the EU's recognition of Irish as an official language on 1 January 2007, how have institutional translators and interpreters been portrayed in the Republic of Ireland's English-language print media?

As in the author's previous study (Hoyte-West 2020b: 176), the data sources were restricted to only English-language materials, as the researcher's proficiency in Irish was only elementary. As a result, the country's three main national quality broadsheet newspapers: the *Irish Examiner* (founded in 1841), *The Irish Times* (founded in 1859), and the *Irish Independent* (founded in 1905) were selected for analysis. As elsewhere in the world, the advent of the internet and changing patterns in news consumption have affected the media landscape in the Republic of Ireland (Flynn 2017). Circulation information for 2018 shows that the *Irish Independent* was the most popular newspaper in the country, with a daily average of 83,900 print copies sold. The second most popular was *The Irish Times*, with around 58,131 print copies purchased each day. The *Irish Examiner* averaged 25,419 print copies sold per day (NewsBrands Ireland, 2020).

In a similar vein to the previous study (Hoyte-West 2020b: 176-177), which examined the portrayal of EU official status for Irish in the country's print media, it was decided to carry out a qualitative content analysis. Although this methodological approach could be criticised as simplistic, it is often used when analysing written communication (Elo & Kyngäs 2008: 107, citing Cole 1988), as it allows for general conclusions to be inferred through the obtention of valid and replicable data (Krippendorff 2018). In addition, the systematic nature of qualitative content analyses means that this approach has been used previously to examine the print media coverage of various other professions. Such studies include Robinson's (2006) study, which analysed the portrayal of librarians, archivists, and records managers in Australian newspapers, as well as Oosthuizen's (2012) examination of how nurses and the nursing profession were represented in South African newspapers. Accordingly, using the Google site search function, the websites of the three major domestic quality newspapers in the Republic of Ireland were examined. The data were obtained through the following combination of keywords: "Irish", "official", "language", "EU", and "translator" OR "interpreter". In terms of the timeframe selected, a period spanning from 1 January 2007, the date that Irish became an official language of the EU, until 1 May 2019 was chosen.

## Results of the analysis

The keywords ("Irish", "official", "language", "EU", and "translator" OR "interpreter") returned 110 results. On initial examination of the search results, however, it became apparent that many of the articles were unrelated to the research question. In addition, strict adherence to articles focusing solely on the portrayal of institutional translators and interpreters meant that articles on related topics (such as Irish language policy) had to be discarded. Hence, the number of articles suitable for analysis decreased to  $n=15$ , a surprisingly low number compared to Hoyte-West (2020b), which was based on a dataset of 88 articles from over 2,000 search results. However, as the literature attests (Concina et al 2013; Roelsgaard 2018), successful analyses of print media have been conducted using the same or smaller number of newspaper articles. In this instance, therefore, it was felt that the quality of the data obtained would be still sufficient to gain an exploratory insight.

Of the total number of articles ( $n=15$ ) coded for either a positive or negative portrayal of institutional translators and interpreters, 80% ( $n=12$ ) were judged by the researcher to have a positive focus. These articles focused primarily on the benefits of working as an EU translator or interpreter, with the aim of encouraging people with Irish language skills to consider a career in those domains. In terms of general benefits, several articles highlighted the economic and practical aspects of a career in the EU

institutions, paying particular attention to the fact that knowledge of Irish was an appreciated skill (“Positive employment prospects for graduates ‘le Gaeilge’” (*The Irish Times*, 7 March 2010); “Sharon Ni Bheolain [a newsreader on RTÉ, the Republic of Ireland’s main public television provider] launches search for up to 180 Irish speakers for EU translator jobs” (*Irish Independent*, 9 June 2016)). More prosaic information, such as deadlines for upcoming linguist competitions, as well as information regarding the salary and other practicalities was also featured in some articles, whilst still highlighting the prestigious nature of the job (“Deadline for Irish translator jobs with EU” (*Irish Independent*, 9 July 2016)).

Other articles underlined more personal aspect of careers in institutional translation and interpreting. These included a letter written by a staff translator in the Irish-language unit at the Council of the EU (“Rewards of learning Irish” (*Irish Independent*, 18 April 2010)) in response to a newspaper article stating that Irish was not a living language. In his reply, the translator noted the “wonderful opportunities” that official EU status for Irish had given him and others, as well as the “dynamic environment [...] at the heart of multicultural Europe” (Ó Ceallaigh 2010). Further articles focused on showcasing individual Irish EU translators and interpreters, paying particular attention to their career trajectories and experiences. In a profile of one of the first EU Irish-language interpreters (“Now you’re talking” (*Irish Independent*, 30 October 2008)), the interviewee noted that the career offers variety, opportunities for travel, as well as possibilities to develop skills in additional languages. Another article, written by an Irish-language translator (“What’s it like to work as an Irish translator in Brussels?” (*The Irish Times*, 23 June 2011)), outlined his previous professional occupation before coming to Brussels for a second career in institutional translation. He stated how “blessed” he felt, noting that the “increased opportunities for graduates with Irish language skills to work in translation, [...] lexicography and terminology development alongside language technology are to be welcomed” (Mac Gabhann 2011).

Of the articles that viewed translators and interpreters in a positive light, one article sought to mix both economic and personal aspects (“Brussels, tá mé ag teacht [Brussels, I’m coming]” (*The Irish Times*, 4 June 2016)). In encouraging young Irish graduates to join the EU institutions, the article noted that “Irish people are already highly sought-after within the European institutions” (Lynch 2016), and also included a profile of a former head of the Irish translation unit at the European Parliament, in which the variety of policy areas, excellent work-life balance, and possibilities for flexible working were also highlighted.

Very few of the articles (20%; n=3) in the dataset portrayed institutional translators and interpreters in a negative light. The first, entitled “State fails to translate Irish plan into action” (*Irish Examiner*, 2 January 2007) highlighted the lack of preparedness

of the Irish government and the EU institutions to implement adequate provision for official status for Irish. Whilst the majority of criticism in the article was reserved for the Irish state, attention was also drawn to the lack of Irish-language translators in the EU institutions. It noted that only five translators with the required skills were available, rather than the twenty to thirty that were required. In addition, although measures that the EU was putting in place to assist with the training of institutional interpreters with Irish were mentioned, the article also quoted an unnamed European Commission spokesperson who stated that there were “virtually no interpreters available who can work from Irish” (Regan, 2007).

Indeed, a further article from the same year (“Irish spoken at EU — but no one around to translate” (*Irish Examiner*, 7 November 2007)), also underlined the difficulties in filling vacancies for institutional translators and interpreters with the relevant Irish language skills, noting that of the applicants “few, if any, had the necessary qualifications to become a recognised EU translator of texts or interpreter of the spoken word” (Cahill, 2007). The third article (“Brussels Briefing: €1.53m EC pay package for Big Phil” (*Irish Examiner*, 6 October 2014)) drew attention, in a somewhat irreverent manner, to reports of Irish being one of the least spoken languages in the EU institutions. Noting that if there were a competition for the “loneliest interpreter”, the article stated that the “underworked” Irish interpreter would surely be the winner, given that only six words of Irish were uttered during the meeting to confirm the commissioners of the Juncker commission (Cahill, 2014).

## Concluding remarks and suggestions for further research

In line with the notions outlined by the conference interpreters interviewed in Hoyte-West (2020a), this exploratory study has shown that institutional translators and interpreters have generally been portrayed in a highly favourable manner by the three main newspapers in the Republic of Ireland. These positive aspects included not just providing information about the economic and practical aspects of the career, but also by presenting portraits of EU translators and interpreters themselves. In detailing their own personal and career trajectories, as well as noting the advantages of working in institutional translation and interpreting, a favourable image of the profession and its practitioners was promoted. Conversely, only a small minority of articles chose to depict institutional translators and interpreters in a negative light. However, it could be argued that this was linked to wider political issues regarding Irish language policy at the European level.

As such, this study uncovered a number of possible avenues for further research. As also noted in Hoyte-West (2020b), a more wide-ranging analysis including Irish-

language print and other media could also prove useful to provide a more comprehensive overview, especially given the small size of the dataset obtained through the current study. In addition, as the derogation on the use of Irish in the EU institutions will expire on 1 January 2022, issues regarding the provision of linguistic personnel will certainly remain paramount in the near future (European Commission 2019: 3-6). In the worst case, these could even stymie the scheduled full implementation of the language. As such, the uncertainty of the current situation means that domestic media interest in institutional translators and interpreters is likely to endure, at least until the day when Irish becomes a full official and working language of the European Union.

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