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Brexit, the Border and the Unification of Ireland.
A Corpus-assisted Analysis of Irish Newspapers

Abstract

This is an analysis of the discourses on Brexit in Irish newspapers. In order to explore such discourses, I built a corpus of newspaper articles on Brexit published in both the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, in different time spans, namely the period of the June 2016 referendum, the EU/Britain deal of 2020, and the announcement of the Windsor Framework in 2023. My corpus-assisted study aims to critically analyse how issues related to the consequences of Brexit were articulated in newspapers, in order to tease out differences in the language regarding the matter at hand at topical moments.

This article primarily addresses key words and phrases related to partition within the corpus (e.g. *border poll*, *hard border*, *united Ireland*), as well as their collocational behaviour. The study investigates key changes in the discourse on both the Irish border and Irish unification during the 2016-2023 period, and considers how possible changes in terminology (e.g. *shared island*, *new Ireland*) can be evidence of a new type of discourse about unification that is slowly surfacing.

1. *Introduction*

Among the most disruptive consequences of Brexit was the potentially dangerous introduction of a hard border separating the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. From the start of the referendum campaign, Irish newspapers seemed more aware than their British counterparts of the centrality of the border issue.

In order to explore to what extent the issue was present at different stages of the political debates, I built a corpus of newspaper articles on Brexit published in both the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. The focus was on three different time spans, namely the period of the June referendum (24 May-

23 July 2016), the EU/Britain deal of 2020 (1 October-31 December 2020), and the announcement of the Windsor Framework (1 February-31 March 2023). My study primarily aims to analyse diachronically how issues related to the consequences of Brexit were articulated in newspapers. Four broadsheets (*Irish Times* and *Irish Independent* for the Republic of Ireland, and *Belfast Telegraph* and *The Irish News* for Northern Ireland) were selected. Behind the choice of news outlets was a concern about the need to have sources from across the political spectrum, while focusing on mainstream and moderate periodicals, and from the two areas involved, in order to tease out political differences in the language of newspapers regarding the matter at hand at topical moments.

Two main aspects were addressed: key words and phrases related to partition (e.g. *United Ireland*, *Irish unity*, *hard border, border poll*) within the corpus, as well as their collocational behaviour (Stubbs 1996, 157-195), with special attention to the value judgments resonating in such usage: e.g. the idea of a border and/or Brexit constructed as potential threat, the possibility of a reunification of Ireland as a consequence of Brexit. My study aims to show how the issue of a united Ireland is now generally considered a necessary topic to discuss, despite the still profound divisions within the communities of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland; my research also considers how possible changes in terminology (e.g. 'new Ireland') can be testament to a new type of discourse about unification that is slowly surfacing on the island.

2. *Brexit and the Irish border issue*

The Withdrawal of the UK from the European Union proved to have potentially dire consequences for the island of Ireland as it would restore a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The hard border had not been there since 1998, the year of the Good Friday Agreement, which started a process that some scholars would call of "debordering" (McCall 2021). The EU was a key force behind the peace process in Ireland, not only because "EU money [was] poured into reconciliation ventures" (Ferriter 2019, 121) but also because "[w]hat [...] made the EU dimension significant was the importance of open borders to the overall EU project and the perception of the EU as being 'neutral' regarding Northern Ireland in a way the UK and Irish governments could not always manage" (Ibid., 121-2). After all, the EU

had started as a continuous, and mostly successful, endeavour to ensure peace in Europe after the Second World War, and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was widely seen as a further step in the same direction. The UK's Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 quite obviously risked jeopardising all this, since avoiding a hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland would effectively contradict "the logic of Brexit" (Hayward 2021, 48).

A compromise solution was reached with the backstop first and then with the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.[1] The 2018 Irish backstop was a temporary solution, that was never actually implemented, to keep Northern Ireland in the EU Single Market, while the Protocol was designed to prevent such hard border on the Island of Ireland and place it in the Irish sea.[2] The Protocol proved especially unpopular with unionists because it introduced new trade barriers in the Irish Sea, effectively separating Northern Ireland from Great Britain, that is, from the rest of the United Kingdom. "Northern Ireland is left in a tenuous position, both outside and inside the European Union, and both inside and outside the UK's internal market" (Hayward 2021, 13).

The entry into force of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, on 1 January 2021, was thus followed by protests and further debates, as negotiators were struggling to "protect both Northern Ireland's place in the UK's internal market and the integrity of the EU's single market",[3] while avoiding a border on the island of Ireland. The result was the implementation of the Windsor Framework on 27 February 2023, which acknowledged and partially resolved some of the issues concerning the original Protocol and introduced a system of green and red lanes intended to avoid a hardening of the border both in the Irish Sea and on the Island of Ireland. The Windsor Framework was generally well received as shown by the results of a survey ran by David Phinnemore, Katy Hayward and Lisa Claire Whitten in April 2023. "Almost two thirds (65%) agree that the Framework reflects a genuine effort on the part of the UK Government and the European Commission to address the concerns raised by people and businesses

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1 Both measures were formally known as 'Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland'.

2 A comprehensive timeline of events and measures can be found here: European Council. "Timeline- The EU-UK withdrawal agreement". https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-relations-with-the-united-kingdom/the-eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/timeline-eu-uk-withdrawal-agreement/ (accessed: 8/1/2024).

3 Šefčovič, Maroš and Cleverly, James. "Joint Statement". January 16, 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_221 (accessed: 8/1/2024).

in Northern Ireland about the Protocol" and "[o]ver two thirds of respondents (69%) believe that Northern Ireland's economy could potentially benefit from the revised trading arrangements agreed in the Windsor Framework".[4]

On the island of Ireland, the potential consequences of Brexit on the peace process were immediately clear even when British politicians seemed still in denial: "[t]here was little evidence [...] that the British Government or electorate had considered Brexit's impact on Ireland, north or south" (Ó Beacháin 2019, 258). In the run-up to the Brexit referendum, Theresa Villiers, the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland defined the "growing concerns over border controls in Ireland in the event of Britain leaving the EU as scaremongering of the most irresponsible and dangerous kind" and that "the land border we share with Ireland can be as free-flowing after a Brexit vote as it is today" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 17 April 2016). On the other hand, Irish journalists and politicians have always being quite vocal about potential risks, but we can see a lack of representation in this sense when it comes to studies on Brexit. While Irish voices have been present both in the media and in political debates before and after the referendum, it is quite relevant that one of the early studies to appear on the local and global media reporting of the Brexit Referendum failed to represent the point of view of media from the Republic of Ireland: "As globally comprehensive as this project had aimed to be, it falls short in terms of representing some key locales. [...] Given the post-Brexit events surrounding border negotiations between the EU, UK, Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, the book's lack of a detailed analysis from the Irish media perspective is a significant omission" (Ridge-Newman 2019, 12).[5]

3. *The Data Set*

The choice of newspapers. I built a corpus (Irish Brexit 2016-23) of newspaper articles on Brexit published in both the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, confining my search only to well-known national daily newspapers, and leaving out local news outlets.

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4 Details of the survey results can be found here: https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/post-brexit-governance-ni/ProjectPublications/OpinionPolling/TestingTheTemperature-Extra/ (accessed: 8/1/2024).

5 See also Kopf 2019, 161-2 and Koller et al. 2021, 2.

The choice of sources responded to both methodological and practical motivations. Four broadsheet newspapers (*Irish Times* and *Irish Independent* for the Republic of Ireland, and *Belfast Telegraph* and *The Irish News* for Northern Ireland) were selected; they were chosen based on a need to have sources from across the political spectrum, while choosing mainly from the moderate camp. While the two newspapers from the Republic are both at least nominally in favour of a united Ireland they do not tend to voice the most extreme nationalist ideals and tend to support the actions of conservative parties. They are the two newspapers with the widest circulation in the country, being also widely read in the border areas of Northern Ireland. As for the other two, they are published and mainly read in Northern Ireland. The *Belfast Telegraph* doesn't have any official political alignment, but represents liberal conservatism and is representative of the unionist camp,[6] while *The Irish News* quite overtly represents Irish nationalism, although in recent times it has started hosting more dissenting voices. The *Belfast Telegraph* and the *Irish Independent* are owned by the same company – Independent News & Media – but this does not seem to affect their production, as divergences in their treatments of Irish affairs show. An analysis taking into consideration more extremist voices could include other news outlets, such as the Sinn Féin periodical, *An Phoblacht*, and the *Belfast News Letter*, which would have been an obvious choice to represent hardcore unionism. However, the former is a magazine, which would have made the corpus unbalanced, and the latter is only available from the Lexis-Nexis database for the interval between 1997 and 2006.

Time frames. I confined my data sample to three relevant timeframes: 1) the month leading up to, and the month following the Brexit referendum (24 May-23 July 2016); 2) the two months before the end of the transition period, a moment which was fraught with uncertainties in Ireland (1 October-31 December 2020); 3) the two months surrounding the adoption of the Windsor Framework (27 Feb 2023) as a solution to the impasse concerning the Irish border issue, ending with the approval of the Framework in the EU Council (21 March) and in the UK House of Commons (22 March 2023). As maintained by Anna Marchi, the choice of segmentation of diachronic time units in

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6 According to the German Federal Agency for Civic Education's news aggregator Eurotopics. Eurotopics. *Belfast Telegraph* https://www.eurotopics.net/en/200190/belfast-telegraph# (accessed: 8/1/2024).

MD-CADS is unavoidably subjective, and it is appropriate depending on the purpose of the study. In my case, I identified three key moments in the history of the Brexit referendum and its aftermaths, which were sufficiently apart, and corresponding to significant events, and I therefore opted for a top-down segmentation based on contextual historical knowledge (see Marchi 2018, 180).

Data. In order to put together a corpus of articles concerning Brexit, I ran a search on the Lexis-Nexis database using the following keywords: 'Brexit' OR 'NI protocol' OR 'Northern Ireland protocol' OR 'Protocol on Ireland' OR 'Windsor Framework'. This allowed me to download a representative sample of articles about Brexit, while trying to reduce noise as much as possible. After some early attempts, for instance, I realised that using just 'protocol' to obtain articles on the 'protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland' exposed me to the risk of gathering unrelated data concerning football and generally sports events, but also of course Covid-19 protocols; similarly, I reluctantly decided against using 'withdrawal' as it would also gather data concerning troops, banks, sports and so forth. This was judged as an acceptable "trade-off between precision and recall", that is a "trade-off [...] between a corpus that can be deemed incomplete, and one which contains noise (i.e. irrelevant texts)" (Gabrielatos 2007, 6). According to Gabrielatos, "[a]n obvious starting point for the compilation of a query is lexis denoting the entities, concepts, states, relations or processes that are to be investigated" (Ibid.). In this case I did not set out to prepare a highly specialised corpus of texts concerning the unification of Ireland, but a corpus about Brexit in Ireland with the aim of investigating newspapers' attitude about Irish unification. There was therefore some 'noise', as not all texts would discuss Irish issues, but the remarkable presence of Irish-related themes was a significant element in my analysis, as it proved that discussing Brexit in Ireland often meant discussing its consequences on the peace process, on border communities, and on the long-standing issue of the partition of the country. A study such as this can be a first step towards an analysis of the various ways in which the potential unification of Ireland is discussed and constructed in contemporary Irish newspapers. Adding query terms relevant to the core term 'Brexit' is motivated by the awareness that when certain themes that are central to the current debate are discussed, they might not be referred to explicitly, but employing related terms all belonging to a restricted lexical constellation (see Gabrielatos 2007, 8) The result was a corpus consisting of 2,966,248 tokens, 2,586,319 words, divided into 4,488 documents, each corresponding to an article.

Newspaper / Date	*The Irish Times*	*Irish Independent*	*Belfast Telegraph*	*The Irish News*	Total
24 May – 23 July 2016	582,611 tokens (828 docs)	487,752 tokens (800 docs)	270,379 tokens (473 docs)	257,364 tokens (474 docs)	1,598,106 tokens (2575 docs)
1 November – 31 December 2020	351,659 tokens (486 docs)	233,814 tokens (316 docs)	150,838 tokens (225 docs)	78,229 tokens (145 docs)	814,540 tokens (1172 docs)
1 February – 31 March 2023	192,397 tokens (216 docs)	109,615 tokens (158 docs)	182,496 tokens (231 docs)	69,094 tokens (136 docs)	553,602 tokens (741 docs)
Total	1,126,667 tokens (1530 docs)	831,181 tokens (1274 docs)	603,713 tokens (929 docs)	404,687 tokens (755 docs)	2,966,248 tokens (4488 docs)

Figure 1. Newspapers and number of articles and tokens

The texts were annotated in order to identify specific sections of individual articles (e.g. headline, graphics) and newspapers were then sorted into sub-corpora (one per each timeframe and per locations) in order to check for differences in keyword frequencies and collocational behaviours, in a way that was also meant to tease out diachronic differences as to how news outlets from different parts of the island of Ireland articulated their positions regarding the matter at hand at topical moments, that is both diachronically and synchronically.

Keywords. Some of the linguistic patterns related to Brexit and Ireland identified in the corpus were rather predictable, but the data-led approach helped identifying less anticipated patterns, which were necessary to gain insights on the language of Brexit in Ireland and mitigate researcher's bias. Some of the most interesting key phrases, as mentioned above, are related to both the partition and the potential unification of Ireland, and they contribute to constructing narratives about both the border and the creation of an all-island state as a consequence of Brexit. These issues are of course very much connected: it was Enda Kenny, the then prime minister of Ireland, who stated, only a few weeks after the referendum, that the 1998 Agreement allowed for a referendum on Irish unification, and that this should be born in mind during the UK-EU negotiations.

When it came to the identification of keywords, I started out considering different reference corpora. I initially ran a comparison using enTenTen21. I chose a corpus of contemporary English since I wanted Brexit-related lexis not to stand out too much, so I needed a more up-to-date benchmark. However, I eventually settled for SiBol, a corpus of English broadsheet newspapers of the years 1993-2021, compiled by researchers at the Universities of Siena and Bologna (Italy).[7] SiBol is preloaded on *SketchEngine* and now also

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7 The website of the University of Bologna describes the SiBol corpus as an "English language newspapers corpus containing around 650 million words in 1.5 million articles from 14 newspapers (the initial version of the corpus, containing UK broadsheets, was created in

includes texts from the year 2021, which made it an ideal choice both in order to have a corpus collecting data from the same register as reference and to avoid most of the noise created by Brexit-related neologisms and phraseology, as well as register-related jargon.

I used *SketchEngine* and LogDice as a frequency score (max value 14) (see Gablasova et al. 2017 for details). The list of bi-grams (Figure 2) revealed crucial information on the corpus. In this specific case, apart from key collocations related to the post-2021 period, which obviously stand out (e.g. *Windsor framework*, *Stormont brake*), and the names of Irish politicians and institutions, it is interesting to see the prominence of collocations such as *border poll, united Ireland* and *Irish unity*, which are present in the SiBol 2021 sub-corpus, but whose prominence and centrality to the withdrawal process warrants them even higher frequency in Irish media. As we saw, Irish-related words are high in the table, but this is not surprising, as the reference corpus is UK-centred and, while it includes papers from outside the UK,[8] does not include any Irish newspaper.

	Word	Frequency[?]		Frequency per million[?]				Word	Frequency[?]		Frequency per million[?]		
		Focus	Reference	Focus	Reference	Score			Focus	Reference	Focus	Reference	Score
1	windsor framework	602	0	202.95	0.00	204.0	18	referendum result	282	58	95.07	0.24	77.5
2	mr kenny	405	15	136.54	0.06	129.5	19	leave campaign	328	161	110.58	0.67	66.9
3	brexit vote	817	279	275.43	1.16	128.3	20	news john	205	18	69.11	0.07	65.2
4	enda kenny	402	24	135.52	0.10	124.2	21	brexit would	305	147	102.82	0.61	64.5
5	the leave	539	127	181.71	0.53	119.7	22	a no-deal	269	102	90.69	0.42	64.5
6	the referendum	1,040	498	350.61	2.06	114.8	23	the north's	269	104	90.69	0.43	64.1
7	a brexit	806	349	271.72	1.44	111.5	24	stormont brake	185	0	62.37	0.00	63.4
8	border poll	391	51	131.82	0.21	109.7	25	the dáil	183	16	61.69	0.07	58.8
9	fianna fáil	374	39	126.09	0.16	109.4	26	irish unity	188	33	63.38	0.14	56.6
10	the dup	1,658	1,018	558.96	4.21	107.4	27	single market	739	839	249.14	3.47	55.9
11	to eur	286	0	96.42	0.00	97.4	28	denis staunton	161	0	54.28	0.00	55.3
12	the remain	341	61	114.96	0.25	92.6	29	the sdlp	205	65	69.11	0.27	55.2
13	eu referendum	504	227	169.91	0.94	88.1	30	ms may	163	8	54.95	0.03	54.2
14	sinn féin	560	283	188.79	1.17	87.4	31	common travel	236	118	79.56	0.49	54.1
15	the windsor	529	269	178.34	1.11	84.8	32	leave vote	174	28	58.66	0.12	53.5
16	taoiseach enda	249	9	83.94	0.04	81.9	33	travel area	237	124	79.90	0.51	53.5
17	united ireland	393	158	132.49	0.65	80.7	34	brexit will	251	154	84.62	0.64	52.3

Figure 2. List of bi-grams

2011 and was extended in 2017 to include newspapers from other countries including India, USA, Hong Kong, Nigeria and the Arab world, as well as UK tabloids)". (Corpus Linguistics - The SiBol Group. "The SiBol corpus on SketchEngine" Last modified 2024 https://site.unibo.it/sibol-project/en/corpus accessed: 8/1/2024).

8 These include *Times of India*, *New York Times*, *Gulf News*, *South China Morning Post*, *The Day Lagos*, *Daily News Egypt*.

The full list of N-grams, or lexical bundles (Baker 2011), was then manually (and therefore subjectively) scanned for items which were related to Irish issues, esp. border, unification, partition and so forth. The assumption is that "[t]he higher volume of reporting can be seen to indicate either rising public interest in the topic, or editorial/management decisions to create high visibility for it. In either case, the frequency of reporting of an event or topic can be safely treated as proportionate to its actual, perceived or projected salience" (Gabrielatos, McEnery et al. 2012, 5).

4. *Border discourse*

As a first dip into the analysis, I looked at one of the most prominent Irish-related collocations, that is *border poll*. The phrase has 391 results, with 131.82 per million tokens.

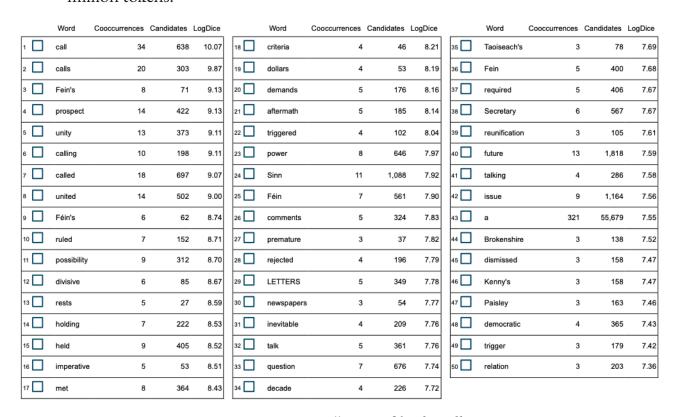|	Word	Cooccurrences	Candidates	LogDice		Word	Cooccurrences	Candidates	LogDice		Word	Cooccurrences	Candidates	LogDice
1	call	34	638	10.07	18	criteria	4	46	8.21	35	Taoiseach's	3	78	7.69
2	calls	20	303	9.87	19	dollars	4	53	8.19	36	Fein	5	400	7.68
3	Fein's	8	71	9.13	20	demands	5	176	8.16	37	required	5	406	7.67
4	prospect	14	422	9.13	21	aftermath	5	185	8.14	38	Secretary	6	567	7.67
5	unity	13	373	9.11	22	triggered	4	102	8.04	39	reunification	3	105	7.61
6	calling	10	198	9.11	23	power	8	646	7.97	40	future	13	1,818	7.59
7	called	18	697	9.07	24	Sinn	11	1,088	7.92	41	talking	4	286	7.58
8	united	14	502	9.00	25	Féin	7	561	7.90	42	issue	9	1,164	7.56
9	Féin's	6	62	8.74	26	comments	5	324	7.83	43	a	321	55,679	7.55
10	ruled	7	152	8.71	27	premature	3	37	7.82	44	Brokenshire	3	138	7.52
11	possibility	9	312	8.70	28	rejected	4	196	7.79	45	dismissed	3	158	7.47
12	divisive	6	85	8.67	29	LETTERS	5	349	7.78	46	Kenny's	3	158	7.47
13	rests	5	27	8.59	30	newspapers	3	54	7.77	47	Paisley	3	163	7.46
14	holding	7	222	8.53	31	inevitable	4	209	7.76	48	democratic	4	365	7.43
15	held	9	405	8.52	32	talk	5	361	7.76	49	trigger	3	179	7.42
16	imperative	5	53	8.51	33	question	7	676	7.74	50	relation	3	203	7.36
17	met	8	364	8.43	34	decade	4	226	7.72					

Figure 3. 4-span collocates of *border poll*

I then proceeded to study the collocations of *border poll* with a 4-word span. The list of collocates of *border poll* (Figure 3) unsurprisingly shows a certain

prominence of words presenting the border poll as a future possibility, even as something *imperative,* to be triggered. It is possible to identify sets of collocates, networks of nouns, adjectives and verbs pointing towards a similar interpretation and therefore working together to present a shared construction of the border poll on the island. While the idea of a border poll to be potential held in the future is not unexpected, the relative scarcity of terms suggesting negative appraisal of the issue (e.g. *divisive*, *premature*, *ruled* as part of *ruled out*, *rejected* and *dismissed*) or conveying negative semantic prosody [9] (Louw 1993; Stewart 2010) (e.g. *issue*, *triggered*) seems significant, and shows that even when the prospect of a border poll is rejected, there are discursive regularities presenting it as an actual possibility. From this sketch, it is also clear that the border poll is primarily linked to one political side, that of the Irish nationalist party Sinn Féin, and is directly, and explicitly, connected with the idea of the unification of the island of Ireland, as proven by the presence of two strong collocates such as *unity* and *united*.

While the analysis of collocates seems to suggest that voices of dissent were generally backgrounded and that the position of parties and individual politicians in favour of a poll was prominent in the press, a close reading of the concordance lines reveals that the representation is not as clear-cut as it might seem at first. This is true especially if we focus on the 2016 sub-corpus, in which the keyness of the phrase *border poll* is more apparent. If we consider the sub-corpora divided by year, it is striking how the vast majority of instances of *border poll* are to be found in 2016 sources, with 279 tokens (174.58 pmt) as opposed to 60 (73.66 pmt) in 2020, and 53 (93.93 pmt) in 2023. Numbers are even more striking if we take geographical distribution in consideration: the 149 hits in Northern papers in 2016 correspond to 282.33 hits per million tokens. Among the various conclusions that could be drawn from this, it is certainly remarkable that the association between the border poll and Sinn Féin is statistically significant only in 2016, when it is always accompanied in Northern papers by the proviso that such a vote "has no hope of happening" (*The Irish News*, 4 July 2016) and is generally dismissed as a political boutade on the part of the Irish republicans (*Irish Independent* 25 June 2016). In a similar vein, in 8 instances, *border poll* is also explicitly linked to the Good Friday Agreement, through

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9 Semantic prosody can be defined as the "consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates." (Louw 1993, 157). See also Stewart 2010.

the almost set sentence "the power to call a border poll lies with the Northern Ireland Secretary of State", originating in the Agreement itself and repeated with minimal changes. This is often a way to counterbalance the possibility of a border poll happening in the near future and on one occasion, in the *Belfast Telegraph*, is completed by "and he [James Brokenshire] brought some sanity to the situation by dismissing the idea outright" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 21 July 2016). Another element that is worth noting when looking at the breakdown by year, is that, of the 35 instances of *border poll* occurring in headlines, 26 are from 2016. These are, unsurprisingly, very polarised and focus 11 times out of 26 on the Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny, who raised the issue of a future poll on reunification at the MacGill summer school on 18 July 2016 and presented it as a necessary part of the negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union. What can be drawn from this is that, while the border issue, as well as that of a possible unification of Ireland, would continue to be debated, as we will see in the following pages, a collocation such as *border poll* was slowly but surely side-lined in the political agenda, which would adopt other phrases to discuss the thorny issue of Irish reunification.

As it can easily be inferred, while *border poll* is undeniably a key collocation in my corpus, the keyness of other words and phrases related to the border issue is also significant, with particularly interesting results for *sea border* (with 116 hits and 39,11 pmt) and *hard border* (209 and 70,46 pmt).[10] This prompted me to run a word sketch analysis of the noun *border*, as the term was so central to the post-Brexit debates, including in newspapers from Great Britain. The border issue is also a very felt one in Irish politics and something that politicians tend to avoid bringing up, to the point that if we look at the text of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA), it is almost only present in the phrase "an all-island and cross-border co-operation" and variants of it. The Good Friday Agreement, also known as Belfast Agreement, is the multi-party agreement that was reached in 1998 between members and spokespeople of the main parties and communities involved in the Troubles, the low-intensity civil war that concerned Ireland for the most part of the late Twentieth century (roughly 1968-1998). The main sides were of course unionists, who wanted Northern Ireland to remain a part of the UK, and Irish nationalists,

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10 This is even more obvious when comparing my corpus to the entire *SiBol* corpus, probably because of the contemporary presence of several "border crises" in 2021.

who fought for the unification of the country. The only other reference to border issues in the GFA is somewhat diluted with other pressing issues and almost used as a neutral geographical term: e.g. "rural and border areas".[11] The situation in my corpus is unsurprisingly quite different, as the consequences of Britain exiting the European Union put this complex issue back at the centre of the political agenda. If we look at the keyword list, the word *border* is barely among the first 300, which is probably due to the fact that border discourse is quite prominent in contemporary news discourse also outside Ireland.

However, the frequency of the term is still quite high, with 1,102.74 per million tokens in the Irish Brexit 2016-2023 corpus, and 3,271 hits. These are especially high in the 2016 sub-corpus (2,027 hits and 1,268.38 pmt), testifying to an interest in the border issue that is present from the very start of the timeframe under consideration. There is a slight drop in numbers in the other two sub-corpora (2020: 754 hits and 925.68 pmt; 2023: 490 hits and 885.11 pmt), that could be interpreted as a slight decrease in newsworthiness of the border issue if extra-textual evidence did not point in the opposite direction. It is more likely that the issue was articulated making reference to the various policies discussed in the early 2020s – namely the Protocol for Ireland/Northern Ireland and the Windsor Framework – but analysing this is beyond the remit of this research, which is focused on the discourse of partition and unification in reference to Brexit.

An analysis of the collocates of border can provide insights into the developments of border-related discussions. A word sketch is defined on the *Sketch Engine* website "as a one-page summary of the word's grammatical and collocational behaviour. The results are organized into categories, called grammatical relations, such as words that serve as an object of the verb, words that serve as a subject of the verb, words that modify the word etc."[12]

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11 The entire passage reads as follows: "Subject to the public consultation currently under way, the British Government will make rapid progress with: (i) a new regional development strategy for Northern Ireland, for consideration in due course by a the Assembly, tackling the problems of a divided society and social cohesion in urban, rural and border areas, protecting and enhancing the environment, producing new approaches to transport issues, strengthening the physical infrastructure of the region, developing the advantages and resources of rural areas and rejuvenating major urban centres" (*The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement* 1998, 20).
12 Sketch Engine. "Word Sketch — collocations and word combinations" https://www.sketch-engine.eu/guide/word-sketch-collocations-and-word-combinations/ (accessed: 8/1/2024).

modifiers of "border"			nouns modified by "border"			verbs with "border" as object		
hard	214	12.1 ⋯	control	196	12.1 ⋯	cross	54	11.1 ⋯
land	109	11.5 ⋯	poll	247	12.1 ⋯	avoid	39	10.4 ⋯
Sea	77	11.0 ⋯	check	67	10.7 ⋯	share	19	9.4 ⋯
open	54	10.5 ⋯	post	41	10.2 ⋯	create	23	9.2 ⋯
Irish	152	9.6 ⋯	area	31	9.2 ⋯	maintain	15	9.1 ⋯
physical	26	9.5 ⋯	region	16	9.0 ⋯	prevent	12	8.9 ⋯
sea	23	9.4 ⋯	county	12	8.7 ⋯	control	11	8.9 ⋯
regulatory	23	9.2 ⋯	checkpoint	11	8.6 ⋯	close	11	8.9 ⋯
custom	25	9.0 ⋯	town	11	8.4 ⋯	keep	18	8.8 ⋯
only	21	8.7 ⋯	closure	9	8.3 ⋯	impose	9	8.6 ⋯
invisible	10	8.2 ⋯	security	8	8.0 ⋯	remove	9	8.6 ⋯
soft	10	8.1 ⋯	arrangement	13	8.0 ⋯	strengthen	6	8.1 ⋯
trade	19	7.8 ⋯	infrastructure	6	7.7 ⋯	put	12	8.1 ⋯
new	34	7.8 ⋯	guard	5	7.5 ⋯	harden	5	8.0 ⋯
so-called	8	7.8 ⋯	crossing	5	7.5 ⋯	scrap	5	8.0 ⋯
external	7	7.6 ⋯	post-Brexit	5	7.3 ⋯	become	11	7.9 ⋯
porous	6	7.5 ⋯	restriction	5	7.2 ⋯	ensure	7	7.9 ⋯
internal	6	7.3 ⋯	road	4	7.1 ⋯	erect	4	7.7 ⋯
visible	5	7.2 ⋯	community	5	6.9 ⋯	see	18	7.7 ⋯

Figure 4. Word Sketch of the noun *border* showing number of collocates and LogDice score.

As mentioned earlier, the GFA mentions the border as little as possible, but when it does, it is mainly presented as a possibility of future co-operation. This is not the case in our corpus, where most of the nouns modified by *border* have something to do with separation (e.g. *check*, *control*, *post*, *checkpoint*, *closure*, *security*), priming an idea of borders as obstacles.

modifiers of "border"			nouns modified by "border"			verbs with "border" as object		
land	81	11.9 ⋯	control	167	12.2 ⋯	cross	34	11.1 ⋯
hard	104	11.7 ⋯	poll	177	11.8 ⋯	share	18	9.9 ⋯
open	48	11.1 ⋯	area	30	9.5 ⋯	maintain	14	9.6 ⋯
physical	25	10.4 ⋯	region	13	9.2 ⋯	control	9	9.4 ⋯
only	20	9.2 ⋯	county	11	9.2 ⋯	strengthen	6	8.9 ⋯
invisible	9	9.1 ⋯	post	12	8.9 ⋯	police	4	8.5 ⋯
soft	10	9.1 ⋯	checkpoint	9	8.9 ⋯	keep	11	8.5 ⋯
external	6	8.3 ⋯	check	14	8.8 ⋯	become	11	8.2 ⋯
Irish	46	8.0 ⋯	town	8	8.4 ⋯	harden	3	8.2 ⋯
custom	8	7.9 ⋯	security	7	8.3 ⋯	close	4	8.1 ⋯

Figure 5. Word Sketch of the noun *border* in the 2016 sub-corpus.

modifiers of "border"				nouns modified by "border"				verbs with "border" as object		
hard	75	11.6 ⋯		check	46	11.2 ⋯		avoid	22	10.4 ⋯
Sea	28	11.1 ⋯		closure	9	10.3 ⋯		cross	9	9.7 ⋯
sea	9	9.8 ⋯		poll	42	10.2 ⋯		prevent	8	9.5 ⋯
regulatory	11	9.6 ⋯		post	14	10.0 ⋯		close	7	9.4 ⋯
land	10	9.5 ⋯		control	22	9.8 ⋯		impose	6	9.2 ⋯
so-called	5	8.6 ⋯		infrastructure	5	9.2 ⋯		agree	6	8.6 ⋯
guarded	3	8.5 ⋯		design	3	8.7 ⋯		create	10	8.6 ⋯
open	5	8.5 ⋯		facility	3	8.0 ⋯		keep	5	7.6 ⋯
Irish	52	8.3 ⋯		issue	3	6.0 ⋯		put	5	7.4 ⋯
EU-UK	3	7.8 ⋯						have	10	5.6 ⋯

Figure 6. Word Sketch of the noun *border* in the 2020 sub-corpus.

modifiers of "border"				nouns modified by "border"				verbs with "border" as object		
Sea	49	11.9 ⋯		post	15	10.5 ⋯		cross	11	10.2 ⋯
hard	35	10.6 ⋯		poll	28	9.7 ⋯		avoid	16	10.0 ⋯
land	18	10.4 ⋯		complex	2	9.2 ⋯		scrap	5	9.9 ⋯
sea	12	10.2 ⋯		guard	2	9.1 ⋯		remove	7	9.6 ⋯
regulatory	12	9.8 ⋯		crossing	2	8.9 ⋯		constitute	3	9.3 ⋯
custom	15	9.2 ⋯		check	7	8.7 ⋯		harden	2	8.8 ⋯
frictionless	3	8.4 ⋯		row	2	8.6 ⋯		soften	2	8.7 ⋯
visible	3	8.4 ⋯		control	7	8.4 ⋯		prevent	4	8.7 ⋯
Irish	54	8.3 ⋯		road	2	8.4 ⋯		create	7	8.1 ⋯
divisive	3	8.3 ⋯		traffic	2	8.3 ⋯		ensure	4	8.0 ⋯

Figure 7. Word Sketch of the noun *border* in the 2023 sub-corpus.

My analysis is in its nature comparative and concerned with the diachronic development of certain key elements within the corpus I have put together. When analysing the breakdown by year (Figures 5 to 7), something immediately caught my attention, that is the distributions of adjectives suggesting the possibility of avoiding a border altogether or reducing its impact on the local populations, such as *open*, *invisible*, *soft*. While the occurrences of *open*, one of the top-collocates in the entire corpus, are almost entirely limited to the year 2016 (48 hits out of 54), the only modifier that can partly be associated with that cluster in the 2023 sub-corpus is *frictionless*, with only 3 occurrences. This shows that looking at the diachronic development evidenced by sub-corpora

is sometimes a crucial way to avoid assuming that strong collocates might be "consistent collocates" (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008, 11; see also Taylor 2018, 25) throughout the entire corpus. More specifically, it suggests that the discourse on the border changed over the seven years separating the extreme ends of the corpus: while at the start, a variety of solutions and definitions of the matter at hand took centre stage in the debate, towards the end of the timeframe under consideration, the possibility of an open border seemed less realistic, and more specific solutions were discussed. At the same time, the frequency of collocates such as *avoid* and *hard* seems to point in the direction of a polarization of the debate, whereby the main concern is avoiding a hard border, rather than contriving a new kind of border, as a close reading of the concordance lines confirms. More specifically, both *border* and *hard border* unsurprisingly tend to collocate with terms such as *avoid*, *prevent*, *imposed* framing it as a threat.

From a systemic functional point of view, the collocation *hard border* is mainly to be found in material and existential processes, where the existence of the border as well as its coming about seem to be the focus:

fear that 'UKexit' would restore a **hard border** across Ireland, and strip away European components (*The Irish News* 28 June 20216)

Scottish independence will produce a **hard border** between Scotland and England. (*Belfast Telegraph* 13 July 2016)

'Fortunately on the island of Ireland the Northern Ireland Protocol means there will be no **hard border**,' she said. For food sales to the UK, she said, 'the deal is better than no deal' (*Irish Independent* 28 December 2020)

The *hard border* is also often employed as agent (or an actor in SFG terms: "A hard border would dampen economic activity on both sides", *Belfast Telegraph* 3 June 2016). Transitivity analysis can yield good results here: not unlike the EU in Marchi and Taylor's analysis of 2009, the *hard border* is here "represented as something that exists and acts (e.g. it "says", "warns", "urges", "moves", "launches", "reacts", "forges" …) and whose actions produce effects" (Marchi and Taylor 2009, 217). Unsurprisingly, both politicians and journalists seem wary of ever talking about the border in positive terms, even when this seems what they want to convey. An expanded concordance line might help clarifying this point:

First Minister Arlene Foster said: "When people talk about a **hard border**, I think they think back to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland have said very clearly they want to make the Common Travel Area work. There are ways to deal with this that we can be creative and flexible about. (*Belfast Telegraph* 23 July 2016)

It was this quotation that made me realise even more how important phrases such as "Common Travel Area" are in the Irish public discourse; CTA is one of the key elements of life in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Isle of Man and the Channel Islands too and despite what one might think, it is not employed to discuss EU matters, but it refers specifically to the possibility for people to travel freely in the island of Ireland. As mentioned above, border talk is often tackled with a certain reticence by Irish and UK politicians and journalists, and what's more, references to the Troubles and the peace process are hard to find. I therefore carried out a close reading of expanded concordance lines of some of the top collocates of *border* (that is *return*, *check*, *between*, *control*, *land* and *hard*) and found out that the vast majority of occurrences of *border* refer to trade and circulation issues, which was to be expected, but that reference to political and sectarian tensions are much harder to find. The collocation *return+border* has 92 hits, but only seven of these explicitly refer to the Troubles or the peace process, and quite significantly shows it in conjunction with *hard border*, another key collocation:

that a UK-US trade deal is "contingent" on respect for the Good Friday Agreement and the prevention of a **return** to a **hard border**. "We can't allow the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to Northern Ireland to become a casualty of Brexit" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 5 November 2020).[13]

It is possible to observe a similar behaviour with *border+control* (13 out of 196); *check* (two out of 115) and *between* (10 out of 220). This is not surprising. A remarkably elusive statement quoted in the *Belfast Telegraph* shows how reticent politicians are to mention violence: "A senior Irish government source said: 'There are concerns in the diplomatic and security regimes on both sides of the border that a reintroduction of the border would lead to

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13 The text within the quotation marks is from a tweet by the then US presidential candidate, Joe Biden, who did not refrain from using the language of war ("casualty") when discussing the consequences of Brexit in Ireland.

new concerns in relation to issues that have been improved in recent years.'" (6 June 2016). Discussions about the divisive and potentially dangerous nature of the border are still present, even though their presence in the corpus is less widespread than I initially thought. These instances show a distinct preference for two key collocations *hard border* and *land border*. While the former is connected to the peace process 31 times out of 214, the latter seems to be the phrasing of choice when discussing sensitive matters, as shown by the 33 instances out of 109 in which the phrase is used when discussing possible implications for the peace process.

5. *The unification of Ireland*

Unsurprisingly, references to the ongoing Partition of Ireland are virtually absent, but only conveyed indirectly through the mention of the border. After all, the Good Friday Agreement does not mention partition either, as a sensitive topic, but discusses the options available to Irish people to achieve the unification of the island by means of a referendum. The collocation *united Ireland* is one of the most common phrases in the GFA (11 occurrences, with a percentage of 804,33 pmt). If we look at the various sets of keywords in my Irish Brexit 2016-2023 corpus, we can see that very few of the key terms of the GFA are still part of the debate, despite the fact that the foundations of the agreement itself were being re-discussed and the GFA itself has become even more than in the past a contentious element of political debate, especially for the unionist community.

Given the prominence of these issues, I have decided to focus on one of the key elements in the Agreement, that is the possibility of an Irish unification following a poll. I have also tried to triangulate my results with those of studies on the phraseology of Brexit within the UK mediasphere, such as Andreas Buerki's (2021). In his analysis of phraseological units in UK media texts, Buerki did not find relevant instances of *united Ireland* and the only Irish-related significant units in his study are *the Irish border issue*, *hard Irish border* and *the Good Friday agreement*, "the latter an example of a relative Brexit expression (occurring in non-Brexit texts, but at a much lower frequency)" (Ibid., 156). In my Irish Brexit 2016-2023 corpus, *united Ireland* has 393 hits, with 132.49 pmt, with the breakdown by year evidencing an

increase in relative frequency in 2023 (2016: 211 hits, 132,03 pmt; 2020: 95 hits, 116,63 pmt; 2023: 87 hits, 157,15 pmt). In order to explore the meanings conveyed by such a debated political concept, I decided to look at its collocational behaviour. When I looked at left collocations (+3 from the node) for *united Ireland* I was not surprised by the presence of *poll*, *border*, *majority*, *unification*, *favour*, *see*, *advocating*, *support*, *calls*, *vote*, *prospect*,[14] each with at least 7 LogDice score.

	Word	Cooccurrences	Candidates	LogDice		Word	Cooccurrences	Candidates	LogDice
1	poll	13	965	8.29	18	want	6	1,523	6.68
2	form	7	376	8.22	19	towards	3	623	6.60
3	Prospects	3	7	7.94	20	referendum	10	3,050	6.57
4	advocating	3	39	7.83	21	A	8	2,624	6.44
5	a	354	55,679	7.69	22	North	4	1,159	6.40
6	favour	5	452	7.60	23	for	67	26,064	6.37
7	part	11	1,584	7.51	24	about	16	6,028	6.35
8	see	13	1,977	7.49	25	interest	3	841	6.32
9	discussion	3	178	7.43	26	off	4	1,294	6.28
10	join	3	200	7.37	27	on	41	21,816	5.92
11	support	11	1,787	7.37	28	what	6	4,029	5.47
12	prospect	4	422	7.33	29	into	5	3,529	5.38
13	calls	3	303	7.14	30	of	78	72,749	5.13
14	vote	19	4,286	7.06	31	or	6	5,690	5.01
15	event	4	655	6.97	32	It	4	6,315	4.29
16	makes	3	430	6.90	33	not	6	11,100	4.10
17	idea	3	522	6.75	34	in	26	51,815	4.03

Figure 8. 3-span left collocates of *united Ireland*.

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14 *Prospects* is a false positive, as it refers to the title of a book (i.e. *Perils & Prospects of a United Ireland* by Padraig O'Malley published by Liliput Press) discussed in the press.

While most of these verbs and nouns, when taken individually, have only relatively low co-occurrences with *united Ireland*, they can be considered together as forming a cluster of collocates framing the idea of a united Ireland as a future possibility. Unsurprisingly, two of the strongest collocates of *united Ireland* in terms of co-occurrences are the prepositions *for* (67) and *on* (41) which would combine with most of these verbs (e.g. advocate for) and nouns (e.g. support for, referendum on) to create distinct grammatical patterns. Another element that is worth emphasizing is that many of these collocates which combine with *for* and *on* are strongly linked with the semantic set of politics and tend to have a positive semantic prosody: *support, advocating, hope, calls, poll* resulting in a general priming of the phrase *united Ireland* as a cause worth being supported.

Moving on to a more qualitative approach to the analysis, in which I read extended concordance lines, I realized that, similarly to what happened with *border poll*, framing the unification of Ireland as a possibility did not immediately imply agreement on the issue. Of the 67 cooccurrences of *for*, 26 express a negative stance towards the possibility, and only 6 of them are to be found in the unionist *Belfast Telegraph*:

Ian Paisley Jr, left, said Enda Kenny's calls for a **united Ireland** referendum were intended solely as a diversion Brexit threw a 'spanner in the works' (*Irish Independent*, 20 July 2016)

We obtain similar results with *on*, showing that the unification of Ireland is discussed as an unsurprisingly very polarizing issue. This confirms that in such delicate matters, a quantitative analysis, which in this case confirms that the issue is frequently debated and is generally framed as a realistic possibility, must be carried out along with a close reading of concordance lines if this is possible. Another element that adds complexity is the focus on *united Ireland* as a construct that needs to be discussed and defined, which is not a given. Taking a leaf out of Marchi and Taylor's book, and especially their contribution on the EU in UK newspapers, I consider Ireland as "not a pre-determined entity waiting to be discovered, but something that is socially and discursively 'constructed'" (Marchi and Taylor 2009, 202). This is clearly conveyed by the collocate scoring the second highest value on the LogDice index: *form*

1	2023-02-04	of 1979, 68 per cent of respondents in the Republic favoured some **form** of a	**United Ireland**	.</s><s>Now, in the ARINS study, it's 66 per cent.</s><s>Even the doublethi
2	2020-11-27	overeignty would transfer if that were the option chosen by voters; the **form** a	**united Ireland**	would take; and any changes to the UK union if the vote was for the status q
3	2020-11-27	s>It would be for the Irish government to develop proposals for the **form** of a	**united Ireland**	.</s><s>Either it could propose a model in advance of referendums, or it cou
4	2020-11-27	nder the concurrence rule, it could not propose any changes to the **form** of a	**united Ireland**	between any referendum in the North and one in the South.</s><s>If voters
5	2020-11-27	ed.</s><s>The government could not propose any changes to the **form** of a	**united Ireland**	between the votes in the two jurisdictions.</s><s>Recommending a process
6	2020-11-27	sibility of the Dublin government to develop proposals for what **form** a future	**united Ireland**	would take, either before or after a poll.</s><s>Pointedly, the authors note "
7	2020-11-27	s it would be for the Irish Government to develop proposals for the **form** of a	**united Ireland**	: "Either it could propose a model in advance of referendums, or it could prop

All these concordance lines refer to the nature of a united Ireland as an entity not entirely determined. They all seem to employ the noun *form* as a vague signifier lacking political concreteness. Not surprisingly, given that most of this discussion happened in the tumultuous aftermaths of Brexit, the lines are evidence of the fact that a future referendum on a united Ireland should clarify either the form or the process through which such a political entity would be achieved, but as many debates concerning the issue, they failed to provide the concreteness that such an ambitious project should entail.

Related to this is the fact that *united Ireland* is the 'goal' or 'phenomenon' in terms of transitivity patterns, as is noticeable from its frequent collocations with preceding verbs such as *see, believe, working out, claiming, constitute, result* etc. In association with these verbs, *united Ireland* seems to be the object of teleological discourses: it is something that is going to happen in the future, not something that was ever present in the past: references to united Ireland and past events are rare. Discourses on a United Ireland as a possible future goal are thus predominant, but nonetheless proponent of a single state entity on the island of Ireland seem to refer to the process as a restoration of an earlier state of affairs through the use of *reunification* (108 hits and 36.41 pmt) over *unification* (79 hits and 26.63 pmt).

If we look briefly at righthand collocates, we get a slightly different picture. Along with the usual *poll* and *referendums*, and some collocates that might suggest optimism (*closer*, *evidence*, *lifetime*) we find a few collocates that point towards the uncertainty of the process: *perhaps*, *seems*, *but*, *rather*, *or* and two key modals such as *would* and *could*. The general uncertainty is also showed by the presence of 16 occurrences of question marks after Ireland, showing that the phrase is often associated with doubt. Modality seems crucial, being present in all timespans and in all newspapers. The following example is noteworthy in this sense:

It is hard to calculate what this will mean in the years ahead, but it is a seismic change. Do we want a **shared island** or a **united Ireland**? As Brexit enters the endgame there is no escaping the fact that the whole process has fuelled a renewed outbreak of Brit-bashing in this country. (*The Irish Times*, 18 December 2020)

Another interesting point is that the *Belfast Telegraph*, the more overtly conservative and unionist newspaper, is ahead in terms of occurrences of *united Ireland* in 2023, with 31 out of 87 in the sub-corpus. When analysing occurrences of *united Ireland* in the 2023 *Belfast Telegraph*, though, we realise it is presented as a very contentious issue, often as a potential danger or an undesirable development. Also, it is often (16 times out of 31) reported as part of the point of view of intellectuals and politicians, or in the letters section, rarely in signed opinion pieces, as if the *Belfast Telegraph* was trying to distance themselves from the issue.[15] A few examples:

In practical terms we need to be very clear with unionists – I want to see a **united Ireland** and we're going to step up our work to bring about a **new Ireland**. "We don't have one yet, but I think we need to say to unionists that the principle of consent [enshrined in the Agreement] is sacrosanct. We won't achieve a **united Ireland** until we convince a majority of people to vote for it". (*Belfast Telegraph*, 4 February 2023)

The largest category in the Brexit referendum among 'neithers' was 'did not vote'. But a border poll will not just involve the voting regulars. So far, the 'neithers' do not appear particularly interested in a **united Ireland**. Only 19% declared in favour. The pro-Union figure was 53%, in line with polls of all electors. (*Belfast Telegraph*, 4 March 2023)

Professor Bell believes the distinctive "Northern Irish identity" would be lost in a **united Ireland**. "That's very important and still growing, but would it survive a **united Ireland**? I don't think so. (*Belfast Telegraph*, 27 March 2023)

As we saw, *Irish unity* was one of the keywords identified at the start: *Irish unity* as a phrase is not included in the Good Friday Agreement, and although

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15 As hinted at above, this is a methodological issue pertaining to much work in Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, and defined by Mathew Gillings and Gerlinde Mautner as "unclear quotation source attribution. [...] In some cases, the quotation marks may lie outside the entire concordance line, so that we may not realise it is a quotation at all". (2024: 49. See also Baker 2018: 283-4 as recommended by Gillings and Mautner).

it does not have the same long and fraught political history of a phrase such as *united Ireland*, it is still charged with political meaning, as it is part of Sinn Féin's political programme and associated with referendums and border polls. These might be two of the reasons that make *Irish unity* the favoured phrase by Northern newspapers when it comes to Irish unification, with 131 hits versus 57 in the Republic, and, more significantly a frequency of 129.91 pmt in the North versus 29.11 pmt in the Republic. While the 2016 occurrences are mainly associated with the border poll proposed by Sinn Féin immediately after the Brexit referendum results were divulged, the need to construct "a new Irish unity narrative" (Chris Donnelly, *The Irish News*, 12 July 2016) is immediately clear and gains more and more momentum in later sub-corpora. The majority of hits from both the 2020 and the 2023 sub-corpora (71 out of 90) present the option of a referendum on Irish unity but do not discuss the nature of the new unified state, and the involved parties tend to shy away from a discussion on the nature of their future relationship. As expected, a cautious attitude is predominant in the unionist *Belfast Telegraph*, whose articles, with very few exceptions, tend to present Irish unity as unrealistic. The *Belfast Telegraph* is also prone to pointing out divisions in the nationalist camp and often resorts to associating the call for a border poll with sectarian violence, which is, as we saw, rare in our corpus:

The Sinn Fein call for an **Irish unity** referendum in the wake of the Brexit vote has also been dismissed jokingly by other former Provisional republicans (*Belfast Telegraph*, 27 June 2016).

The results obtained from the analysis of both *Irish unity* and *united Ireland* provide further quantitative evidence to what scholars of the border such as Katy Hayward have known for a long time: they have warned against focusing too much on the idea of a unification of Ireland as this could alienate union-ists.[16] The attitude of even relatively moderate unionist papers such as the *Bel-fast Telegraph* seems to confirm this conviction, as it is proven by their reaction to the extraordinary publicity campaign brought about by Sinn Féin since the immediate aftermaths of the Brexit referendum, and which saw an impressive

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16 Hayward, Katy. 2018. "A United Ireland." Interview by Tim Mc Inerney and Naomi O'Leary. *The Irish Passport*. Audio. 7 March. https://www.theirishpassport.com/podcast/s2-episode-1-a-united-ireland/ (accessed: 8/1/2024)

deployment of resources in the early months of 2023, the year of the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.[17]

The diachronic analysis of the corpus has allowed me to identify emerging patterns and select them for further analysis, which, as Gabrielatos and Baker maintain can "lead to the examination of their (expanded) concordances, or, when needed, the examination of whole texts", even resorting to "downsampling" to "create a more manageable number of texts for the CDA analysis" (Gabrielatos-Baker 2008, 6). I therefore went on to explore seasonal collocates and infrequent collocations concerning the issue of Irish unification and co-operation, that I was expecting, from awareness of the political context, to feature more prominently in the corpus. One of the surprisingly infrequent collocations is "Shared Island". The phrase is only present 61 times in the corpus (20.56 pmt), 57 of which in the 2020 sub-corpus. The "Shared Island Initiative" was launched by Micheál Martin as a programme of the Department of the Taoiseach intended for "ambitious North/South and East/West cooperation", which is defined as such on its gov.ie dedicated section: "The Programme for Government and revised National Development Plan (2021-2030) set out a significantly-enhanced level of ambition for collaborative all-island investment".[18] Despite this, the initiative was mainly discussed in papers from the North (38 hits).

The goal is a more connected, sustainable and prosperous island for all communities. This is backed by a total **all-island** investment commitment of more than €3.5billion out to 2030, through the Government's **Shared Island** Fund; Project Ireland 2040 funds; resourcing for North/South cooperation; and the PEACEPLUS programme, delivered with the European Union, UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive. (Ibid.)

The emphasis on the geographical term "island", rather than the potentially more controversial "Ireland" is telling and it is frequent in the related documents. This is common when talking about finance or demography, with *whole island*, for in-

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17 The party campaign mainly targeted Irish-American communities in the USA. Bowers, Shauna. 2023. "US arm of Sinn Féin spends €110,000 on Irish unity newspaper adverts" *The Irish Times*, June 1. https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2023/06/01/us-arm-of-sinn-fein-spends-110000-on-irish-unity-newspaper-adverts/ (accessed: 8/1/2024).
18 Gov.ie. "Building a Shared Island". https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/32de3-building-a-shared-island/ (accessed: 8/1/2024).

stance, exclusively employed in the corpus in relation to supply chains and trade, and *entire island* only used twice to refer to the political entity. The "Shared Island Initiative" is also emblematic of the various formulations that have been employed over the last few decades in order to avoid discussing a united Ireland in purely nationalist terms and make room for the variety of positions (nationalists, unionists, in-betweeners; see McCall 2021, 90) that would constitute the new state: new Ireland, John Hume's Agreed Ireland and so forth. The 18 December 2020 *Irish Times* article by Stephen Collins quoted above put it quite bluntly, choosing a straightforward headline: "Do we want a shared island or a united Ireland? Nationalist Ireland must choose between two competing visions of the future". In this article, Collins connects the search for a new name to the need he identifies to avoid "a nationalist narrative that runs counter to everything our membership of the European Union represents".[19]

While concepts such as "Shared Island" have course in the political economic debates and provide new perspectives from which to consider the process of unification, they do not seem to have made a great dent in the public debate as it is represented in news outlets. As we have seen, the Shared Island Initiative is rarely discussed in the Irish newspapers of our corpus and even less so in the SiBol 21, where only 9 hits of the phrase are present, not all referring to Ireland. To make matters more complicated, in Northern papers, it is usually presented as Mr Martin's Shared Island, with quite an obvious predicational strategy, effectively limiting its being a *shared* project. What started at least apparently as an attempt to mitigate the political weight of the issue of unification, was promptly rearticulated in a way that would put emphasis on its republican and green political tinge.

To understand the approach taken by newspapers in this debate I have also briefly explored the wider context outside my corpus. A significant line from a Mark Bain's article in the *Belfast Telegraph* reads: "Anyone with doubts needs to know how a path to Irish unity is going to be different. The terminology may

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19 Stephen Collins connects the "inclusive approach to commemoration" urged by the President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins with Brit-Bashing and more importantly "In the long term this could have more damaging consequences for the people of this island than Brexit itself by fuelling a nationalist narrative that runs counter to everything our membership of the European Union represents." The same article set in contrast "a shared island in which all traditions are respected" and "a forced unity regardless of the human and economic cost." This prompted me to check for other occurrences and collocations of "unity" (that is, excluding *Irish*), but the results were not significant.

have changed – '**Irish unity**' being replaced by **'new Ireland'** – but the sentiment remains the same" (4 December 2021). Among the news outlets here under scrutiny, the *Belfast Telegraph* is the most vocal in questioning assumptions about a United Ireland, and devotes much space to analysing the various proposals. As discussed, the *Telegraph*'s attitude is generally dismissive, as shown in another 2021 article, this time signed by Malachi O'Doherty and unapologetically titled: "If SF wants unity so badly, how come its voters aren't fussed?; Majority may want a united Ireland, but they won't pay for it". The article's lead is also telling:

What kind of Ireland do people in the Republic want? Some want a united Ireland that absorbs Northern Ireland and retains the national anthem and flag. Others want a new Ireland, a merger of the two parts into something different from what went before. The new Ireland, **they** say, would be richer and more diverse. (30 November 2021)

The divergence between a "united Ireland that absorbs Northern Ireland" and a "new Ireland" that would bring about "something different" is clearly expressed in this uncompromising opinion piece and shows how *new Ireland* is becoming an increasingly prominent collocation in the political debate on the island of Ireland.[20] Quantitative evidence also supports this analysis, since *new* is one of the most significant collocates of *Ireland* in the entire corpus, with a LogDice score of 7.1. The majority of hits occur in 2023 (29 hits), with an increased score of 7.4 in the sub-corpus, testifying to what looks like an ongoing change in terminology, although it is still early to determine whether *new Ireland* is a key political phrase. To be sure, the idea (and the label) of a "New Ireland" has been in and out of the political lingo for the past few decades,[21] but it is certainly undergoing a remarkable exposure over the last few years, and

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20 This is somewhat confirmed by a recent discussion on the Wikipedia page for "United Ireland". The page now states that "United Ireland (Irish: *Éire Aontaithe;* Ulster-Scots: *Unitit Airlann*), also referred to as Irish reunification, or a *New Ireland*", but on 12 November 2023, an editor deleted "New Ireland" and commented "New Ireland isn't a popular term and could be interpreted as something different than Irish republican goals". Their edit was however downvoted and the "New Ireland" reference restored. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=United_Ireland&action=history (accessed: 8/1/2024).
21 Among the various instances in which the term has surfaced, the "New Ireland Forum" established in 1983 by Garret FitzGerald is certainly worth mentioning. The key role played by the then SDLP leader John Hume might also provide more context to the recent choice of the party to revive the phrase.

its potential was recognised by the Social Democratic and Labour Party leader Colum Eastwood, who "established a "New Ireland Commission" in 2021[22] with the not too veiled intention of appropriating the expression and giving it substance and shape.

6. *Concluding remarks*

This was an exploration. As such, it could only, by the very nature of the corpus, assess the weight of discourses on the reunification of Ireland within the dataset gathered through the selected query terms. A different picture might arise if the whole output of the newspapers considered was taken into consideration (see Marchi 2018, 179). Among the limitations of the study, I should also mention the fact that the SiBol 2021 reference sub-corpus inevitably yielded fewer relative results concerning Brexit-related issues because of it not being a specialized corpus, but a general one, including all articles published in 2021 in the selected sources. Hence, relative frequency does not testify to the salience of Irish-related terms in the Brexit discourse, but only in the entire sub-corpus. My analysis remains, however, representative of the centrality of certain issues within the Irish debate and their connection with Brexit rather than as a comparison of attitudes in Britain and Ireland.

I have been trying to make sense of the Irish responses to Brexit, focusing on the domestication of global news in an island strongly affected by the result of the referendum. I have demonstrated how the discourse on the border changed over the seven years separating the extreme ends of the corpus: while at the start, the idea of a border poll was primarily associated with Sinn Féin and widely discussed, the phrase was progressively side-lined. The exploration of the collocations of *border* also showed how at first a variety of solutions and definitions of the matter at hand took centre stage in the debate, while towards the end of the timeframe, the possibility of an open and frictionless border seemed less realistic and more specific solutions (hard, sea and land borders) were discussed. I also pointed out how references to the Troubles, and more

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22 Despite the SDLP's intentions, the initiative does not seem to have gathered momentum since its launch and activity on the official website appears remarkably sparse. (https://newirelandcommission.com/ accessed: 8/1/2024).

generally to sectarian violence, were extremely hard to find in connection with discourses on rebordering and unification. This was possible thanks to a blend of quantitative and qualitative analysis, which allowed me to select significant lexis and collocations, but also to expand my analysis beyond concordance lines when deemed necessary.

While there are still profound divisions within the communities of the Republic and Northern Ireland, this article makes clear that the notion of a united Ireland is now generally felt as a necessary issue to discuss. Quite significantly, the *Belfast Telegraph*, in order to argue against the idea, ended up raising the issue quite more often than the other newspapers under consideration, and giving it prominence. As Naomi O'Leary, a political correspondent for the *Irish Times*, stated in her co-hosted podcast, *The Irish Passport*, the last few years have been essential to bringing "the language of united Ireland back into the norm"[23] and this has also happened thanks to the frequent contributions made by those radically opposed to the idea. Brexit has tremendously accelerated that process and made the notion of a referendum on Irish unification a distinct possibility in the future. Recently, and quite surprisingly, Wallace Thompson, one of the founding members of the DUP declared that "[t]here's an inevitability in my mind that we are moving towards some form of new Ireland" (*The Irish Times*, 4 September 2023), significantly employing the less controversial phrase *new Ireland* together with a vague phrasing such as "some form of", which emphasises a widespread inability to define the terms of the future nation. The very concrete problem of a hard border, as well as the impending discussion concerning a potential unification of the nation are frequently mentioned in the press, but often employing opaque phrasings. Attempts to find new, possibly more inclusive and shared banners under which to gather the supporters of an all-island nation are frequent. However, as we have seen when discussing the use of *form* as well as the teleological discourses related to the unification of Ireland, the tendency to define intricate political issues with abstract and vague language is widespread. Perhaps, the possible change in terminology that I have alluded to is evidence of a new type of discourse about a "new Ireland" that is slowly surfacing, although the articulation of such concepts in the press still seems abstract and elusive.

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23 O'Leary, Naomi. 2018. "A United Ireland." *The Irish Passport*. Audio. 7 March. https://www.theirishpassport.com/podcast/s2-episode-1-a-united-ireland/ (accessed: 8/1/2024)

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