Metalinguistic discourse about English on Flickr: A case study on Irish identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a case study focusing on the analysis of the relation among metalinguistic discourse, language and cultural identity. For this purpose, it examines the posts of ten Irish speakers on Flickr, an online site where users commonly share pictures with short comments. A small-scale corpus of 84 English-written utterances was collected to describe the metalinguistic discourse of users' posts in order to ascertain links to their own perception of identity. Results demonstrate that Irish users seem to prefer online communication in English although they have developed a strong sense of individuality, which is characterized by employing traditional Irish stereotypes as positive identity markers.
Keywords: metalinguistic discourse; Irish identity; Flickr; culture

RESUMEN

Esta investigación es un estudio de un caso sobre la relación del discurso metalingüístico, la lengua y la identidad cultural. A tal fin se examinaron los comentarios online de diez participantes nativos de Irlanda en Flickr, un espacio virtual donde los usuarios suelen subir fotos y algunos comentarios cortos. Se recolectó un corpus pequeño de 84 proposiciones utilizadas para describir sus percepciones sobre su identidad. Los resultados demostraron que, aunque los usuarios irlandeses optaron por comunicarse en inglés, estos habían desarrollado un sentido profundo de la individualidad caracterizado por asumir estereotipos irlandeses tradicionales como marcadores positivos de su identidad.
Keywords: discurso metalingüístico; identidad irlandesa; Flickr; cultura

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"LANGUAGE IS THEN a 'double-edged sword; constraining identity by erecting boundaries between 'them and us' be they geographical or sociocultural, and liberating identity by offering fresh opportunities to cross barriers and boundaries" (Evans, 2015, p. 4). In the current globalized world, communication can provide a means of encouraging identity plasticity (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 26) or the dynamic adoption of linguistic, social and cultural characteristics that allow individuals to change roles and integrate into different community groups. In this respect, language may be an ideal instrument for diminishing long-standing differences as well as improving international and intercultural communication. Paradoxically, it is claimed communication might also stimulate language use as an identity marker with the potential of separating society into socio-cultural sub-groups.

Social media, such as Flickr, have direct implications for language and identity as they are perceived as major vehicles of socialization, where individuals participate in a community of speakers in the present that also connects, via cultural transmission, with the past and the future. What characterizes Flickr from other social media is that its users employ little language since they prefer pictures. As a result, that language, although atomistic, becomes a significant field to analyze metalinguistic discourse: the use of reflexive expressions surrounding personal language descriptions or pictures (Arigne & Rocq-Migette, 2015). Though it is not the intention of this study to examine the pictures uploaded by users, Flickr, as an international community, is a virtual space where it is possible to find instances of how people resort to language to describe their language, and thus their feelings of social identity.

Due to the strong relationship among language, culture and identity, this paper aims at describing a case study showing how Irish users of Flickr employ language to describe themselves as well as to recreate their identity. Heininge (2009) argues that the Irish language is a rich terrain to examine the dichotomy between written language and perceptions towards social identity. The author claims that while language tends to follow the English standards, it mirrors a strong cultural conflict and deep desire for individualism. Accordingly, Flickr might be an interesting research area for proving this assertion.

Theoretical Framework

Language, culture and identity

Language and identity are intimately related: identity is concealed in language while language is its voice. Not only does this interplay mirror social values, but it also reveals individuals' cultural identity and sense of self (Kramsch, 1998, 2013; Kroskrity, 1999). "Language is the way individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves, the powers they claim for themselves and the powers they stipulate to others" (Lippi-Green in Nunan & Choi, 2010, p. 77). Simply stated, language is used as a

kind of self-branding tool whereby individuals unlock socio-cultural patterns that unfold congruent or incongruent interactions between speakers or community groups (De Fina, 2012).

Identity involves people's explicit or implicit responses to the question: "Who are you?" This may sound fairly simple, but it masks considerable amount of complexity (Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2011, p. 6). Identity is a changing cultural construction that is modified by speakers' personal and collective history as well as the continuous assessment of their community prestige and their own prestige within that community. Hence, its multi-faceted essence exerts a far-reaching impact on individuals' integrative motivation and self-perception (Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2011).

Foulcault (1980) maintains identity is a temporary creation emerging from the daily exercise of power. In this sense, it is conceived as a choice for what is perceived as prestigious. Prestige stems from a web of complex cultural relations where individuals negotiate multidirectional representations through discourse. The technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) or the social practices of self-disclosure such as diaries, autobiographies and social media, illustrate how language constructs and is constructed by a variety of active relationships. Consequently, language becomes the dynamic interplay between the identity forged by historical background and the one based on the desire for a different future (Blot, 2003; Norton, 2000, 2013; Weedon, 2004).

Irish identity

Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles (2011) as well as Labov (1972) argue identity is an essential feature of any social act. According to Chassy (as cited in Evans, 2017), individuals tend to display socio-cultural affiliations towards a particular community, which can result in the adoption of its language and perceptions. Baggioni and Kasbarian (as cited in Versluys, 2000) refer to this phenomenon as identification or the encouragement of positive interpersonal-intergroup social relationships with the community. However, identification does not necessarily imply linguistic uniformity because sharing the same language does not entail displaying the same cultural identity.

The various colonization and migration waves to Ireland have unfolded a society where revival efforts intersect with the historical imposition of the language of the colonizers (Heininge, 2009). This dichotomy presents an unresolved conflict between the adoption of Irish or Standard English. The former calls for an awakening of the Celtic culture by rejecting to accommodate to Standard English (Dowd, 2011). This view is supported by claims such as "'a people without a language of its own is only half a people'" (Davis in Edwards, 2010, p. 108). Because the Irish language was traditionally stereotyped as inferior or shoddy by English rulers, many fruitless attempts were made to replace Irish by Standard English, placing the first at the verge of extinction. During the 19th and the 20th century, national identity movements turned Irish into a symbol of local identity by stressing the

importance of an Irish education and the need for the replacement of English names for Celtic ones (Hickey, 2007). On the contrary, adherents of Standard English conceive accommodation to a seemingly growing anglicanization could foster integration as well as social development. Due to the current status of Standard English in the globalized world, speakers appear to require an increasing competence in English, resulting in a shift towards the language of the oppressor (Edwards, 2010; Heininge, 2009).

Metalinguistic discourse and sociolinguistics

Speakers' reflections on their own language may reveal affinity or distance from ideological imperatives and cultural perceptions. Language, aside from physical and intellectual features, is the means whereby speakers assess others and accommodate to the socio-cultural characteristics of a group (Evans, 2015). In this sense, metalanguage reveals integration efforts by adhering to the cultural stereotypes that emphasize social membership and cultural compatibility with a prestigious group (Jaworski, Coupland & Galasinski, 2012; Lindsay, 1997). Therefore, it could be an indicator of how language facilitates what Kristiansen (2001) refers to as positive distinctiveness, or speakers' motivation to be regarded as an in-group member.

However, metalanguage might unveil cultural clashes between overlapping identities by deviating from membership criteria and stressing stereotypes that foment distinctions between social groups (Arigne & Rocq-Migette, 2015). Zuengler (as cited in Giles, Coupland and Coupland, 1991) declares culturally diverse speakers employ metalinguistic resources to mark their ethnicity when they perceive the interlocutor as a threat. The author also maintains speakers can resort to standard language, regional varieties or stereotypes to be differentiated from addressees. Hence, the metalanguage of stereotyping could signal the existence of a growing recognition of cultural minorities as opposed to the dominant culture.

Social media

Social media are currently used for many purposes ranging from mere communication to marketing. In the post-modern society, characterized by its almost boundless and unlimited communication forms, public social media are free means of individuality since the audience is so wide that it is a virtual stranger. Technology enables its users to connect with diverse and multi-cultural groups (Danet & Herring, 2007). Moreover, as online posts lack strict control, any message can be made public, even if it is offensive or repetitive. As a consequence, comments as well as thoughts that would not be externalized in a face-to-face conversation tend to be expressed without restrictions in the virtual space, leading to a greater authenticity (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). In this sense, the web has transformed into some kind of utopian space where nothing is actually impossible because the inexplicit is made explicit. The digital version of an individual's identity might reveal a great deal of his real self (Lipschultz, 2014).

Individual and collective identities are impacted by these new media on account of the fact that they become transparent in users' posts, uploaded images, videos or audios. The opportunity for displaying one's individuality with a large public opens a window to an unprecedented capacity of expression that is not regulated by old, traditional sources such as family. This phenomenon fosters a creative self-image that may deviate from expectations (Oliver, 2016). And even if so, comments seem to encounter radical support from the online community. Consequently, language is freed to express the identity the media user desires (Danet & Herring, 2007; Lipschultz, 2014; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014).

Social media enable users to become members of online communities that do not necessarily coincide with geographical limits. These groups tend to interact by means of linguistic accommodation while simultaneously retaining their own idiosyncrasies (Seargent & Tagg, 2014; Standage, 2014). Thus, the aforementioned authors suggest that online spaces provide a field for the intersection of the global and the local as well as the opportunity to exercise identity plasticity (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 26) to a greater extent since virtuality permits a substantial degree of flexibility (Oliver, 2016).

Methodology

The results of this article are based on a case study that was carried out in March 2017. A corpus analysis methodology was employed because it could serve, in Hunston's words (as cited in Hunston, 2006, p. 117), as a "repository of cultural information about a society as a whole". Although a larger sample might have been used, it was assumed that a case study would provide the opportunity for describing language in a more comprehensive way.

Participants

Participants were drawn from a convenience sample of 10 Irish native speakers who were active users of Flickr. On average, participants (5 females, 5 males) were 16-20 years of age (M=18). They were studying at secondary school or pursuing an undergraduate degree at university.

Irish participants were selected because they are good representatives of the vast cultural richness and ambiguities of the United Kingdom that portray the actual complexities of the relationship among language, identity and culture. Besides, as native speakers of English, they were assumed to represent equally well the traditional English standard written language as well as the linguistic characteristics of the Irish variety and its slang.

Subjects were contacted as they had participated in an international student exchange program during 2016. A group of adolescents from a secondary school in Ireland studied in Argentina for a four-month period at a partner institution located in a western town of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. They were asked to cooperate with this project as well as to assist the researcher in extending the invitation to other Irish-speaking mates who could become potential participants. This resulted in an initial sample to which the following

selection criteria were applied so as to ensure its representativeness:

1. Nationality. Participants were born in Ireland and were native speakers of English.
2. Age. Subjects aged 15-20 were asked for participation based on the studies on ethnical diversity and multiculturalism in Reitz, Breton, Dion and Dion (2009). The authors suggest people in the aforementioned age range tend to display a wide variety of social dynamics as they appear to be generational in-betweeners who grew up with popular local traditions while using the new communication forms.
3. Communication. Participants frequently used Flickr to communicate with other Irish users. They also had followers from other nationalities.

Subjects fulfilling the above-mentioned criteria were sent an online invitation to participate for free in this study and were explained about the general research topic, the tasks they were expected to perform, the extent to which their answers would be held confidential as well as their rights to anonymity and privacy.

Corpus collection and analysis

Flickr was selected as a convenient social platform owing to a number of reasons. First, it is an online space with various users with multiple nationalities. Therefore, it seemed an ideal place to examine how users described themselves in front of a large pluralistic audience. Second, Flickr is characterized in the cyberspace as a photo sharing site. Hence, language comments tend to be short and to the point, which was perceived as a facilitative feature for this study. On the contrary, other online sites exhibiting long posts could be too obscure or ambiguous due to their lack of linguistic formality.

The researcher's role was that of a passive observer (Underberg & Zorn, 2014), a member of the social media under examination who witnesses online communication flows but does not interact with participants. Passive observation allows the detection of online behaviors in a more unbiased way owing to its lack of socio-cultural engagement in the online group. However, because the relationship between the researcher and participants is asymmetrical, the latter can perceive the former as an outsider intruding in their interactions, a fact which may limit their posts or make them more aware of the content uploaded to social media (Underberg & Zorn, 2014).

As regards analysis, the first step was to collect a specialized corpus of naturally occurring, random posts among Irish users for a time range of five days. This period was selected since it was assumed that, as subjects were offering their collaboration for free, a short data collection time would encourage their participation and weaken the possible perception of a prolonged privacy invasion. Besides, as the whole sample was manually compiled and examined, it was also believed that a limited collection period was recommendable due to practicality reasons.

The second step comprised a lexical analysis. Posts were scrutinized according to

whether they presented any metalinguistic mention to participants' perception towards their Irish identity. As a result, an output of 264 naturally occurring posts was gathered, summing up a total of 84 English written utterances. As expected, the lexical density of the corpus was low since the total number of tokens was of 1848 with 1163 distinct words.

Word frequency, key words and expressive terminology were studied on account of their potential cultural and ideological saliency. Metalinguistic discourse was used in its interpersonal variety, characterized by exploring the writer's attitudes rather than textual markers (Arigne & Rocq-Migette, 2015). Other features like collocational strength degrees were disregarded. Pictures, photos and emoticons were also excluded from this paper on account of their aesthetic implications, which would require a specialist in semiology for proper description.

The third step consisted in annotation so as to ascribe words and multi-word items into categories that would facilitate interpretation. The categories are described below:

S: Stereotypical comment

I: Comment based on idealizations

C: Comment expressing closeness to the Irish identity

D: Comment expressing distance from the Irish identity

Finally, some descriptive calculations were made in order to determine the number of utterances expressing some metalinguistic reference to identity as well as identity markers.

Results

The quantitative analysis of the corpus showed that out of the 84 collected utterances, 54 employed some instances of metalinguistic discourse displaying features of stereotyping, idealization of the Irish identity as well as closeness or distance to/from it. In other words, 64.28% of the comments in the corpus showed some relationship between metalinguistic discourse and Irish identity. It is possible to state, in a decreasing order, that 28 utterances (51.85%) expressed stereotypical comments regarding the Irish identity; 20 utterances (37.03%) illustrated closeness to the Irish identity, 4 utterances (7.40%) portrayed distance from the Irish identity and only 2 utterances (3.7%) mirrored users' idealizations. Table 1 and Figure 1 display a summary of the aforementioned results.

Table 1. Examples extracted from corpus.

Types of comments	Examples
Stereotypical comment	I know u think I'm a drunk, and is true and good! i can't stop listening my fighting blood. want to try the red one? I reckon many have. recognize the poet inside me? I do. I'm a dirty speaker, I admit it. i'm in love with my potato eater.
Comment based on ideal-ization	I'd like to be less red. Irish isn't good. American's better.
Comment expressing closeness to the Irish iden-tity	i love Irish. Red rules! a really proud poor Irish! many islands but none is like home. in love with Irish luck. Clovers and Irish forever.
Comment expressing dis-tance from the Irish iden-tity	Hate this stupid drunk Irish city. irish are not like me. I'm a very different type of abusive irish…an eng-lish irish. I'm aware i am more English like, luckily!!

(All examples have been written in the same way they were posted online. Mistakes have not been corrected so as to reflect the users' original expression).

Figure 1. Graphic representation of classified utterances.
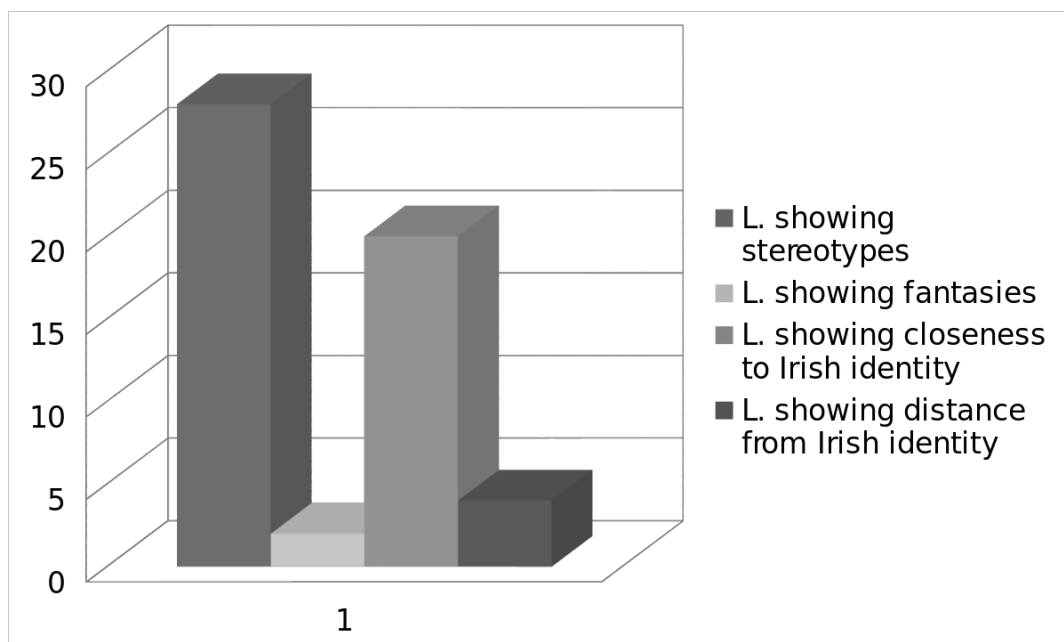
In terms of key word analysis, it was found that the words "Irish", "English" and "red" were highly used. They were encountered in an 87%, 85% and 79% of the corpus, respectively. Other less frequent key words were "drunk", "potato" and "bard/poet", which represented the 45%, 34% and 31.3%, respectively.

Discussion

In agreement with Heininge (2009), this study showed a positive attitude towards the Irish culture and identity despite a marked preference for Standard English. It seems that, though the collected utterances reflect the common language mistakes found on social media due to context informality, Irish users of Flickr do not appear to prefer the traditional Irish slang. Instead, they consistently use English standard written language while offering compelling evidence that the vast majority has an intense feeling of individuality. This point can be seen in utterances such as i'm in love with my potato eater, which refers to the recognition of the Irish stereotype regarding the popularity of potatoes in Ireland.

The findings are in line with Barker and Galasinski's (2001, p. 26) notion of identity plasticity. Flickr, as a multicultural space, emphasizes the fluid boarders of social media in the globalized world. Furthermore, it accentuates the importance of rapid responses and positive support whereby each user can promote his self. This adheres to the view that identity can be compared to a self-branding experience that is open to continuous re-design in order to obtain other users' approval (De Fina, 2012).

Despite its history of English domination, Standard English is the language of the web and social media even for Irish users. This analysis suggests that Irish Flickr users could opt for Standard English not only for solidarity or cooperation purposes with their non-Irish followers but also for prestige, since they can express themselves only if they manage to be understood. Although it is to be expected that a minority group employs social media to display its language so as to strengthen its identity, resorting to Standard English, the language of the web, to communicate online appears to be an appropriate way of encouraging self-awareness and self-branding experiences to a larger audience.

The metalinguistic examination finds various instances of identification (Baggioni & Kasbarian as cited in Versluys, 2000) in salient stereotypes like "red", "drunk", "potato" that were collected in the corpus. The first is a negative association with the common generalization that the vast majority of people in Ireland are red-haired, a stereotype linked to savagery and aggressiveness. The second is a prejudice rooted in the idea that alcohol is embedded in the Irish culture, a conception leading to the thought that the Irish are a vicious population. The third is a derogatory comment about a popular versatile ingredient in Ireland. Although this crop was highly productive, the Irish were given marginal infertile lands for its cultivation. This reference speaks of manual, dirty work that reinforces the idea of the Irish as uncivilized and primitive peoples. Nonetheless, these stereotypes are present in positive comments such as Red rules! This phenomenon may agree with Kristiansen

(2001), who claims that individuals strive to maintain positive social identity with their in-group. Furthermore, users seem to express their desire to change those derogatory images by asserting their national pride. To exemplify, the phrase a really proud poor Irish! shows the user's acknowledgement of his Irish individuality when he could have referred to the fact of being poor as a disadvantage. Thus, the metalinguistic discourse does not seem to mirror the Irish as a marginalized group.

Stereotyping can be said to create a vicious circle. The Irish exhibit their Irishness by stressing traditional cultural representations, leading to the disclosure of stereotypical features that foster their identity while encouraging the perception that those stereotypes are true. Thus, it is possible to say that online posts, although they present stereotypes as a positive image of the Irish culture, appear to feed deep-rooted prejudices.

In addition, the stereotypical language used online could be said to present certain in-group frankness. Considering participants had followers from other nationalities, it was notorious that they employed so many stereotypical figures when their audience might have been unaware of their socio-cultural meaning. This open display of traditional cultural images, even though it could have risked communication and cultural understanding, appears to be a signal the Irish desire to communicate their Irishness.

Moreover, utterances express some transgression of what might be considered unruly behaviors. This can be seen in expressions such as "i can't stop listening my fighting blood or I know u think I'm a drunk, and is true and good!" These transgressions are transformed into something positive that makes users feel proud of their nationality. They do not seem uncomfortable with the use of old Irish stereotypes; on the contrary, they attempt to perpetuate and reinforce them as markers of national identity. As a result, some behaviors like being drunk could be perceived as heroic.

In some cases, participants relate to other non-Irish cultures. For example, the utterance "I'm aware i am more English like, luckily!!" could reflect a desire for community distance and closeness to the English or American culture. This may relate to the fantasy of being "other" like in the phrase "Irish isn't good. American's better." Although this tension is little represented in the sample, it can be stated that some users agree with the conception that the Irish culture is mostly negative, a point which demonstrates that sharing a language does not necessarily imply experiencing the same perceptions towards national identity (Baggioni & Kasbarian as cited in Versluys, 2000).

The findings of this research do not seem to reveal any fierce rivalry between the Irish and the English cultures. Despite the Irish positive distinctiveness with their local culture, few attempts to express a different identity are made. Hence, this analysis suggests that while Irish traditional images are embraced as identity markers, the use of English standard written language may demonstrate a collective desire for multicultural interconnectedness.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

The topic chosen as an area of study is complex due to a number of reasons. First, identity is a many-sided construct to analyze. It is not a mere individual phenomenon or something static since it is built though social interaction, which impacts on the definition of who people think they are and how they act in intergroup dynamics. As a result, future research could probably consider a pseudo-longitudinal analysis.

Second, the understanding of the Irish identity is much dependent on its vast history. For reasons of space, this paper does not include sufficient historical background so as to examine Irish identity. Thus, key aspects of the Irish culture like religion, geography, lifestyles in and out the capital city and others have been omitted though they are crucial as history and language are intertwined.

Third, social media research should consider that the lack of online restrictions could lead users to develop super-identities where they are portrayed as beautiful, smart and socially desirable. Even though they are given a space to separate themselves from the social expectations of their community group, and be authentic, the web may be a tempting space for fantasizing about unreal identities (Oliver, 2016). Hence, analysis in this field ought to acknowledge the possibility that users' posts might not actually reflect their identity but romantic fantasies about a better self.

Regarding the chosen methodology, case studies, although very convenient for exploring areas where little research has been conducted, present results that might look weak when compared with large-scale experimental methodologies. Moreover, it is necessary to state that the findings of this research are limited to its reduced number of participants and the fact they were aware of the general research topic. Accordingly, another methodological design could have a positive impact on the present paper.

Additionally, quantitative research lacks appropriate contextualization; therefore, it might be reductionist in terms of data analysis. Complementing this study to some qualitative instruments could add an interesting and vivid interpretation to the collected data despite the sample size and generalizability issues. Also, metalinguistic comments might include the analysis of the pictures on Flickr as well as the reaction of the audience to the comments made by Irish users. For example, Lee (as cited in Tannen & Trester, 2013) considers the role of both comments and uploaded pictures in a study on metadiscourse. An approach like that one could enrich the present examination and provide a greater significance to its data.

Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring metalinguistic discourse as a marker of socio-cultural identity in a sample of Irish users of Flickr. Its findings appear to demonstrate that the vast majority of online users makes some reference to their Irish culture and identity when commenting on Flickr.

The collected corpus seems to indicate that a significant number of the utterances with some explicit evaluation of Irish identity perceive their Irishness with pride. It might be stated that the online context could be a symbol of the transition between the end of a period of cultural prejudice and the beginning of a renewed community pride.

Many key words reflecting traditional stereotypes were found; however, it might be said that they were positively employed by stressing them as identity markers rather than as signs of social distance. This phenomenon might be claimed to be in agreement with Heininge's thesis (Heininge, 2009).

A further important result demonstrated that the Irish posted comments on Flickr in the English standard written language. The corpus did not register any instances of Irish slang. This phenomenon illustrates a tension between a seemingly alive English tradition and a renewed Irish pride, a fact that may suggest some kind of hybridization between the English and the Irish culture. However, this last point cannot be taken for granted.

Comments regarding social distance and the idealization of another identity were not recurrent. Those that were indeed part of the study showed that, in line with Dieckhoff (Dieckhoff in Jaspal, 2009), who proposes that individuals achieve social distance by identifying with "others", Irish speakers with a negative perception towards their cultural heritage appear to fantasize with an English identity or, in minor cases, an American one.

Hence, in terms of practical pedagogical purposes, it might be asserted that English is probably re-building its role as a lingua franca, as Irish Flickr users prefer it to Irish slang to communicate with an international audience. Despite the traditional antagonism between England and Ireland, online participants appear to be willing to sacrifice their linguistic cultural heritage for the sake of international, multilingual communication without apparent signals of resentment. This phenomenon can reinforce the significance of English as a lingua franca, and thus its importance in growing multi-lingual classrooms.

Aside from that, it could be possible to assert that communication has reached such significance around the world that English is chosen as a medium to language expression irrespective of past socio-historical background that may have been linked to the English culture. Regardless of the perceptions towards their own Irish community, all participants commenting on Flickr that took part in this study employed English as a point of contact to the world inside and outside their community groups.

The open and supportive nature of online sites might be succeeding in bridging the dichotomy between English as an international language and the culture of the colonized nations. Social media do not seem to perpetrate negative stereotypes as such since they are transformed into positive identity markers that transcend old stigmatizations. In this sense, an analysis of metalinguistic discourse shows that language can be used for transgression rather than for concealment while simultaneously contributing to national identity. This could be said to demonstrate Seargeant and Tagg's (2014) claim of social spaces as an intersection between global and local practices, where users do not appear to be interested in

exploiting a public image other than their Irish one.

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