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Visions of the Future in Budgetary Discourse

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Introduction

Whilst there is ample precedent to argue against the common-sense notion that the ideological leanings of political parties are congruent with their implementation of fiscal policy (Boix, 2000; Garrett & Lange, 1991; Hibbs, 1977; Liargovas & Manolas, 2007), there is a relative dearth of research on the role of discourse in shaping fiscal policy with one notable exception by Maatsch (2014). With this in mind, we approach the issue of examining fiscal policy through a fixed, contested and subverted within particular texts" (Howarth, 2005, p. 341). This paper examines how the future is constructed in Irish budget speeches delivered between 1970-2015 using a combination of close readings and collocate analysis of the word future over four subcorpora.

We commence with a brief overview of extant literature on the role of discourse in policy process analysis before outlining our methodological approach. This is followed by an overview of key results and analysis, concluding with discussion and final remarks.

1. Discourse and the policy process

The role of discourse within policy process analysis complex, on the one hand it is possible to observe increased interest in the application of discourse, in the broadest sense, as an analytical concept (Howarth & Griggs, 2012). Yet the field remains dominated largely by positivism, and exhibits an uneasy stance towards much research which seeks to apply interpretivist, postmodern or social-constructionist epistemologies (Bacchi, 2000, 2009; Bacchi & Bonham, 2014; DeLeon & Martell, 2006; Durning, 1999; Lynn Jr, 1999). In reaction to this positivist orthodoxy, a number of

post-positivist, post-structuralist and post-foundational approaches have contributed much to the analysis of policy processes.

This can be observed from literatures on the argumentative (Fischer & Forester, 1993; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012; Gottweis, 2006; Hajer, Hoppe, & Jennings, 1993; Hajer et al., 1993) and ideational turns (Béland, 2005, 2007, 2009; M. Blyth, 1997, 2002, 2015; Campbell, 2002; Griggs & Howarth, 2002; Weible, Heikkila, & Pierce, 2015) which seek to respectively investigate the role of argumentation and ideas in the context of understanding policy change, to discursive institutionalism (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Hogan & O'Rourke, 2015; Hope & Raudla, 2012; Schmidt, 2001, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018) and post-structural policy analysis (Gottweis, 2003; Griggs & Howarth, 2017; Howarth, 2010; Howarth & Griggs, 2012, 2015; Nabers, 2009, 2015; Panizza & Miorelli, 2013) each employing differing concepts of discourse in their respective analyses and analytical frameworks. The current study is situated within a post-structuralist approach to policy analysis which, in the words of Gottweis is

> analogous to a performative process which uses and mobilizes complex, heterogeneous systems of representations to fix the meaning of transient events (such as an economic recession). In doing so, it is possible to move them in space and time and make them susceptible to evaluation, calculation and intervention (Gottweis, 2003, p. 260).

From this perspective we are confronted with the process of policy formation and change as a discursive phenomenon. A role for the analyst emerges with a particular focus "on the attempts of policy-making to create order and structure under conditions of instability that would seem to undermine such efforts" (Gottweis, 2003, p. 262) and by elucidating how "in the process of policy-making, the unification of a political space through the instituting of nodal points constitutes a successful hegemonic attempt to define a political reality, subject identities and modes of action" (Gottweis, 2003, p. 260).

Whilst acknowledging this growing literature and the application of post-structural discourse theory to the analysis of topics such as green ideology (Stavrakakis, 1997) and environmental

policy (Griggs & Howarth, 2017), there remains a dearth research on the application of post-structural discourse theory where it concerns the issue of fiscal policy. In spite of this budgetary discourse has been analysed to assess rhetorical techniques employed in the enactment of reforms (Levasseur, 2000), the construction of deficits as socially undesirable or negative (Sinclair, 2000), and even the link between rates of participation in political discourse at a municipal level through online dialogue between citizens and local government (Roeder, Poppenborg, Michaelis, Märker, & Salz, 2005).

The important role of discourse in the analysis of parliamentary speeches is acknowledged by numerous scholars (Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steenbergen, 2004), from the link between discourses in parliament and their effects at an executive level (Chohan & Jacobs, 2018) to the role of discourse in addressing issues as broad as climate change (Willis, 2017), innovation (Perren & Sapsed, 2013) and racism (van Dijk, Wodak, & others, 2000). Further, contributions concerning the difference between speech and action at provincial levels of government (Imbeau, 2009) and dissonance between speeches and their implementation (Foucault & François, 2009) further emphasise the importance of understanding the role of discourse.

3: Method

3.1 Aim

This paper aims to examine the how the future is "produced, fixed, contested and subverted" (Howarth, 2005, p. 341) within Irish budget speeches from 1970-2015 as a medium for the construction of fiscal policy. With this aim in mind, the following questions are asked. Which discourses are employed in Irish budget speeches from 1970 to 2015? How are these discourses structured around given nodal points? And finally, how is the future constructed within different budgetary discourses.

3.2 Data

The budget statement was chosen for analysis as it constitutes a key strategic document for constructing the reality of a state's finances (Couture & Imbeau, 2009). It is also a consistent genre and format of performative text (Baker, 2006) ideal for constructing a corpus. The corpus was compiled from parliamentary transcripts of budget speeches delivered in the Irish parliament between 1970 and 2015, totaling approximately 500,000 words. The corpus thus exceeds the minimum scale proposed by Kennedy (2014) for investigating discourse prosody by fivefold.

The range of dates were chosen for this diachronic analysis as it was deemed necessary to investigate a period of time which had a strong chance of exhibiting significant discursive change. Given extant literature on the persistence (Colin, 2011) and emergence of neoliberalism both within (Mercille & Murphy, 2015) and beyond (Duménil & Lévy, 2004, 2005; Harvey, 2011) the context of Ireland, the dates in question were selected for investigation.

Given the sheer scale of the data at hand, it was impractical to subject a corpus of this scale to close reading. Therefore it was necessary to select a smaller segment of the corpus which could be subjected to close reading. With this in mind we chose to analyse the opening and closing statements within the speeches as they constitute two clearly delineable subcorpora within the total corpus. The opening and closing statements combined create a body of text which is approximately 45,000 words in length is unique in its tendency to summarise aims, objectives and the tenor of whole speeches. The opening and closing statements were chosen for close reading due to the fact that in and of themselves, they act as important linguistic performances where serious truth claims are made (Griggs & Howarth, 2017).

3.3 Analytical Concepts And Measures

3.3.1 Post-structural discourse theory

Discourse theory as elaborated in the works of Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau, 1988, 1990, 1993, 2000, 2007, 2015; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) seeks to convey "the idea that all objects and actions are meaningful and that their meaning is conferred by particular systems of significant

differences" (Howarth, 2000, p. 101). It presupposes that all meaning is relational (Howarth, 2000; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Marttila, 2015) and the practice of discourse analysis therefore becomes the practice of identifying the structure of these systems of meaning which can never achieve total fixation or closure (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001).

It is important to point out that discourse, in the case of post-structural discourse theory, is concerned with understanding how meaning is produced and cannot be reduced to communicative actions such as writing or speaking (Griggs & Howarth, 2017). From this perspective social relations can be considered from the standpoint of discourse, as discourse is that practice which both organises and constitutes social relations. It is in this sense that drawing distinctions between discursive and non-discursive practices, as advocated by some discourse scholars (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough & Wodak, 2006; Schmidt, 2008, 2010, 2015) loses its utility. Discourse in this post-structural sense is the practice of meaning creation *in toto*, or more specifically the partial fixation of meaning, not the practice of specific utterances (Marttila, 2015).
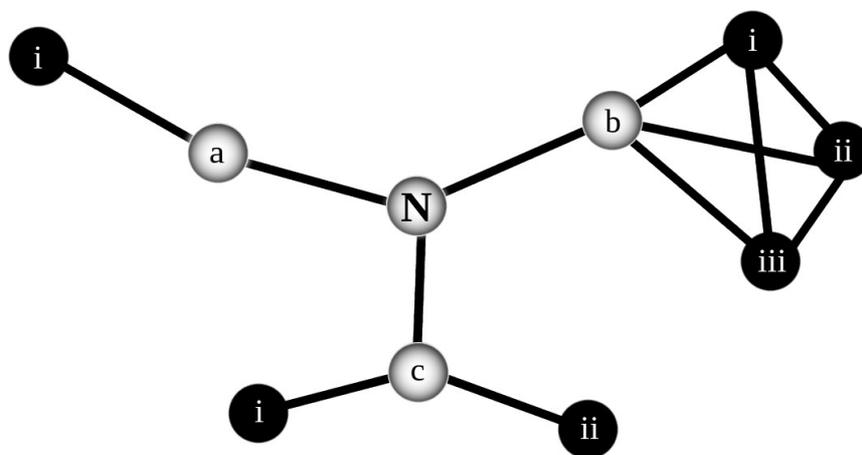
Articulation, nodal points and floating signifiers

Discourse is a practice of structuring contingent elements into systems of meaning through articulation which enables a temporary fixation of meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Whilst a discourse might become sedimented and relatively stable over extended periods of time, it can never be entirely fixed (Howarth, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Discourses are constituted through the practice of partially fixing signifiers in relation to a nodal point. This process occurs through the practice of articulation by means of which contingent elements come to be necessary moments within a discourse, as Laclau and Mouffe (2001) explain

> we will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse*. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call *moments*. By contrast, we will call *element* any difference that is not discursively articulated. (p.105)

In order to understand the structural composition of a discourse, a number of further concepts are useful. In Figure 1, a graphical representation of a discursive structure is shown to help elucidate the concepts of nodal points and the floating signifiers

Figure 1: Discursive structure

Source: author's interpretation of "the practice of articulation" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 113)

The lightly shaded circles signify floating signifiers, elements whose meaning is contested by a number of discourses. 'N' signifies a nodal point whilst vertexes connecting nodes on the map signify articulations. Dark solid nodes signify elements, or moments insofar as they are articulated in relation to another signifier. For the purpose of discussion, the second moment of the floating signifier b is denoted as b^{ii}, while the first moment of the floating signifier c is denoted as c^i.

Drawing on an example from Žižek's (2008) discussion of the Lacanian "*point de capiton*" (p. 96), here synonymous with the nodal point (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), one might imagine two competing discourses concerning the topic of freedom where one is a liberal, the other communist. For simplicity, let us imagine that both discourses share the same structure as seen in Figure 1 where the nodal point is freedom and the floating signifiers, those contested elements between the two discourses, are a as subject, b as wage labour, and c as democracy.

Nodal points are privileged signifiers which bind together separate elements in a discourse into a coherent, partially-fixed, system of signification. They act as a *point de capiton*, or master signifier which confers meaning to all other signifiers in the discourse (Howarth, 2000; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Žižek, 2008). Nodal points are not given, they must be empirically revealed as those signifiers which confer meaning to the discourse as a whole; in the case of budget speeches this entails searching for that signifier which enmeshes a diverse set of policies, identities, visions of the future, visions of society and objectives into a coherent system of meaning. By showing how a limited number of nodal points structure the majority of opening and closing statements one can glean the ideological limits of acceptable discourse over the period examined. This provides a rich context to the general structure of discourse encountered within the texts, providing the basis for further investigation into those moments where discourses suffer from dislocatory events.

Hegemony and Dislocation

Hegemony is a central concept in post-structural discourse theory, Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discussion of hegemony is influence from Gramsci's (1992) concept of hegemony which envisaged the particular interests of a social class being transformed into universal interests, the formation of an historical bloc, where the interests of the particular, concrete subject (working class) become the interests of the universal, abstract subject (the nation, or the people). This concept of hegemony was developed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) in an anti-essentialist vein to produce a concept for understanding the way in which particular and contingent discourses can come to be seen as fixed, natural and universal.

Hegemony can be defined as "the expansion of a discourse, or set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action by means of articulating unfixed elements into partially fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces" (Torfing, 1999, p. 101). Unpacking this definition, a number of points arise. Hegemony is the process of establishing a dominant horizon of meaning through which the world is understood. It is in this sense that one can talk about liberalism, in the classical sense, as a hegemonic discourse. The subject-position arising from liberalism as a discourse is a rational, self-interested and competitive subjectivity (Ball, Dagger, & O'Neill, 2016). That these values seem beyond repudiation, and even adopt the mantle of the very essence of human nature attests to the continued reproduction of liberalism as a hegemonic discourse.

Hegemonic discourses only ever manage to become partially fixed, regardless of how enduring that partial fixation may be. To understand the manner in which this partial fixation can become unfixed requires an understanding of the concept of dislocation. A dislocation is a sudden rupture during which an existing discursive order is disrupted due to its inability to symbolise a sudden event (Howarth, 2000). According to Laclau (Laclau, 1990, p. 39) moments of dislocation give rise

> not only to negative consequences but also to new possibilities of historical action … the accelerated tempo of social demands lead to a higher awareness of historicity. The rapid change in discursive sequences organizing and constituting objects leads to a clearer awareness of the constitutive contingency of those discourses. This historicity of being of objects is thus shown more clearly.

Dislocation is thus important for understanding not only the final moments of a hegemonic discourse, but also those instances in which a hegemonic discourse is maintained in the face of competing discourses.

Constitutive outside and antagonism

According to Laclau (1990), it is not enough to understand the structural composition of a discourse as shown above in Figure 1, one must also take account of the fact that discourses are always also constituted by an exterior, a constitutive outside. This exterior is perceived as something which disturbs the unity of the discourse, yet its existence permits a relationship of exclusion necessary to constitute the discourse. For Laclau's (1990) understanding of discourse it is not enough to *be*, a discourse must stand in relation to other discourses. Thus, being is inherently imbued with a sense of negativity; what constitutes a discourse is not simply the structural arrangement of signifiers around a nodal point but also this constitutive outside, all those things which are excluded from the discourse. One cannot constitute The Pale in the absence of that which is beyond it.

Another important concept for understanding discourse is that of antagonism (Laclau, 1988, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), not to be confused with contradiction. One can hold or adopt a multitude of contradictory beliefs or identities but an antagonism arises at the point where one identity must exclude another. Many contradictory views may be incorporated within a discourse without those views being antagonistic.

Each of these theoretical concepts is employed in a close reading of opening and closing statements to offer a basis for segmenting the corpus along lines which indicate potential differences in the discursive structure of Irish budget speeches across the forty-five year period in question.

Collocate analysis

The concept of collocation proposes that words gain much of their meaning through their proximity to other words, thus the propensity for a word to be located beside or near another word within a text plays a role in understanding how its meaning is constructed (Baker, 2006; McEnery & Hardie, 2012). By examining collocates of the word future, we can gain an understanding of how

meaning is constructed through the company it keeps with other words and how this changes over time. Collocate analysis is conducted within the parameters of word groupings which extend five words to the left and right (5L5R) of the word future.

The statistical measure of association used to generate collocate rankings is mutual information (MI), this is combined with the use of n-best lists, increased to produce the five most salient collocates as it is noted that MI "should always be combined with a frequency threshold to counteract its low-frequency bias (Evert, 2009, pp. 1229–1230). N-best lists are chosen over arbitrary frequencies as "the arbitrariness of pre-specified threshold values and the lack of good theoretical motivations … n-best lists should always be preferred over threshold based acceptance sets" (Evert, 2009, p. 1217). Additionally, a stopword list developed by Fox (1989) is employed to remove common words of little to no lexical value for analysis. The minimum collocate frequency (MCF) used to generate the five most salient collocates is referred to on each table.

Collocate analysis will proceed by examining the five most salient collocates of the word future before examining samples of the collocates in context. In summary we commence with a close reading of opening and closing statements to inform corpus segmentation and delineation of distinct budgetary discourses. We then proceed to analyse discursive constructions of the word future through an investigation of its collocates.

4. Results and analysis

4.1 Irish Budgetary Discourses

The section starts with an analysis of nodal points based on the close qualitative analysis of open and closing statements in the budget speeches. A close reading of the opening and concluding statements reveals that the overwhelming majority of budget speeches are structured around a group of commonly recurring floating signifiers which become moments when articulated in a specific discourse. These floating signifiers are economic growth, employment, fairness and economic recovery.

We find that the opening and closing statements of Irish budget speeches during the period in question were broadly structured around two discourses; the first of which is a hybrid of social democratic and liberal welfare-state discourses drawing legitimacy from Keynsian economic discourse, which for the sake of brevity we refer to as a social democratic discourse. The second is comprised of a multitude of neoliberal discourses most commonly organised around a soft variant of neoliberalism (Quiggin, 2018). The progression from one discourse to another is far from linear or clear, punctuated by periods of vacillation from one discourse to another. As a result of this uneven development we chose to segment the corpus into four sections as follows, where breakdown periods constitute periods of significant flux between old and emerging discourses.

1. Period A: Social democratic discourse 1970-1977

2. Period B: Breakdown of social democratic discourse 1978-1982

3. Period C: Soft-neoliberal discourse 1983-2008

4. Period D: Breakdown of soft-neoliberal discourse 2009-2015

Discursive change can clearly be observed when considering a small number of examples pertaining to the construction of economic growth. During Period A, growth is constructed as an outcome of public expenditure, a clear example of a hegemonic discourse as the minister remarks "our approach is a pragmatic one … not dictated by ideological dogma" (Colley, 1978, [Budget Speech]). One of the clearest examples of this reasoning is observed in the following excerpt delivered by Colley:

> The additional spending power of almost £35 million released through this budget will raise the national growth rate by about 1¾ per cent between mid-1972 and mid-1973. This is over and above the contribution to growth and employment made by the increase of £30 million in the public capital programme (Colley, 1972, [Budget Speech]).

After an extended period of competition, the link between public expenditure and economic growth tentatively gives way to a new discourse which no longer views fiscal stimulus as an appropriate tool for stimulating economic growth. This can be seen clearly in the following statement by Dukes:

Working draft, please do not quote – comments and criticisms welcome to authors.

We are in the grip of a severe recession. The natural reaction to this situation would be to prepare a Budget which would give a fiscal stimulus to the economy. After careful reflection and consideration of all the factors affecting and determining our present situation, the Government have concluded that this course is not open to us (Dukes, 1983, [Budget Speech]).

Finally, this new neoliberal discourse which eschews fiscal stimulus in favour of fostering competitiveness is strongly sedimented by the turn of the millennium. This can be clearly observed a statement typical of the period in question:

The budgetary targets and goals are based on the over-riding need to keep our economy competitive and on the need to ensure that this is reflected in our approach to how we reward ourselves. In particular, the budgetary targets are dependent on the delivery of the commitments, including the industrial peace commitments which were underlined and strengthened in the recent agreement negotiated with the social partners. If this scenario is departed from, our ability to achieve these goals will be jeopardised. The competitiveness upon which our growth is based will disappear and we will be in danger of heading back to the days of significant unemployment and emigration (McCreevy, 2001, [Budget Speech]).

With a brief discussion of periodisation derived from a close reading of opening and statements completed, we turn to collocate analysis to understand the ways in which the future is constructed throughout the corpus.

4.2 Constructions Of The Future: Collocate Analysis

Tables 1 to 4 demonstrate the five most salient collocates of the word future pertaining to each of the periods in question. Whilst commonalities exist across each of the periods we focus here a select few collocates, each of which offers a specific perspective on the changing meaning of the future across the texts.

A common theme among collocates of future during Period A is their relationship to inflation. The future is constructed overwhelmingly in the context of combating inflationary pressures, a particular concern of the era in question. This can be seen clearly in the statement made by Ryan who argues that "it should not, by now, be necessary to explain further why a pay pause after the current national agreement is not merely desirable; it is essential to our economic future" (Ryan, 1976, [Budget Speech]).

Table 1. Period A: Social democratic discourse 1970-1977.

mcf=4					
Rank	Freq	Freq L	Freq R	Stat (MI)	Collocate
1	4	4	0	8.70076	Near
2	6	0	6	6.78322	Prospects
3	6	2	4	4.23406	Growth
4	4	0	4	4.19826	Development
5	5	3	2	3.34556	Economic

Also of note is the appearance of the unique collocate prospects. Investigation demonstrates that it is often constructed in the context of future prospects for economic growth. This in turn is intimately linked to the relationship between inflation and growth as Lynch remarks that "we have dangerous inflationary pressures which are threatening our future prospects for growth and development and at the same time are causing serious social injustice" (Lynch, 1970, [Budget Speech]). We can also see a typical Keynesian discursive logic at play where it is argued that by an "increased emphasis on capital investment, future prospects for growth and job creation will be enhanced" (Ryan, 1976, [Budget Speech]).

The years from 1978 to 1982 are defined by a lengthy period of discursive turmoil during which one can observe both social democratic and neoliberal discourses attempt to articulate the horizons of a problematic fiscal situation which culminated in a debt crisis. This is most clearly reflected in the strong tendency for future to collocate with secure. During a period of deep insecurity we observe emotive attempts to articulate a moral duty to eschew budget deficits, as in the case of Bruton's comment that:

Budget deficits are demoralising. They encourage the myth that one can spend what one has not earned, and that it is right to ask the taxpayers of the future to pay the price of present weakness and extravagance. It is our duty to ensure that there is a secure and prosperous future for the children of this country. They will have neither prosperity nor security if we continue to spend their birthright (Bruton, 1982, [Budget Speech]).

This remark from Bruton is typical of a neoliberal discourse where public expenditure is no longer constructed as a positive factor in enabling economic growth. Instead it is constructed as a threat to the prosperity and security of future generations.

Table 2. Period B: Breakdown of social democratic discourse 1978-1982.

mcf=3					
Rank	Freq	Freq L	Freq R	Stat (MI)	Collocate
1	4	4	0	8.82303	Near
2	4	4	0	7.46046	Secure
3	3	2	1	4.61544	Benefit
4	3	1	2	4.36986	Measures
5	3	0	3	4.21535	Economy

Concern for the future of the economy permeates this period, as seen in a statement by MacSharry who argues that "the firmness of the Government's tackling of the economic and financial problems with which we are faced will be good for confidence, both domestically and abroad, in the future of our economy." (MacSharry, 1982). In short, the future is constructed as inherently insecure, requiring decisive action and sometimes harsh measures to ensure a better, more secure economic base for successive generations.

One can witness a continuation of this tendency to construct the future as something which must be secured during Period C where secure once again appears, this time as the most salient collocate for the period. An overarching theme during this period is a tendency to conceptualise the future as something which must be invested in. This can be seen in the following statement by Quinn who remarks that the future can be secured through a combination of social partnership focused on maintaining competitiveness and the development of national infrastructure

The existence of the Programme for Competitiveness and Work, the National Development

plan, and the commitment of this Government to maintain its budget strategy, which I have

outlined here today, provides a secure future within which I am inviting the Irish people to

plan and invest (Quinn, 1995, [Budget Speech]).

Table 3. Period C: Soft-neoliberal discourse 1983-2008

mcf=9					
Rank	Freq	Freq L	Freq R	Stat (MI)	Collocate
1	9	8	1	6.53818	Secure
2	17	7	10	4.76947	Growth
3	9	3	6	4.74211	Budgetary
4	9	5	4	4.10522	Provision
5	20	6	14	3.44640	Budget

This theme is continued a decade later, where investment exhibits distinctively soft-

neoliberal overtones in relation to large-scale capital expenditure. This investment is directed not

just at those services explicitly beneficial to private enterprise, but also towards improving

traditional welfare state services such as education, housing and health:

> The national development plan is an ambitious programme of investment in the future.
>
> Nothing on this scale has ever been attempted before in our history. It will transform our
>
> country socially and economically and I am determined to roll it out as planned and thereby
>
> secure our future … The main elements of our capital investment programme for 2008 will
>
> concentrate on transport, education, housing and environmental services, with significant
>
> spending in other areas such as health, agriculture and enterprise (Cowen, 2007, [Budget
>
> Speech]).

Confidence also appears once again in discussions pertaining to the future and its ability to be

secured, as seen in the remark by one minister that "this is a budget designed to secure the future for

us all in a fair and balanced manner. It will do this by carefully managing the public finances to

sustain confidence in the economy" (McCreevy, 2001, [Budget Speech]). During this period we

observe that public expenditure is permissible insofar as it does not affect the future confidence of investors.

Period D is notably different from its predecessor, though this is somewhat unsurprising given the dire economic context in which many of the speeches during this period are delivered. The most salient collocate of the word future for this period is generations, as seen below in Table 4.

Table 4. Period D: Breakdown of soft-neoliberal discourse 2009-2015

mcf=4					
Rank	Freq	Freq L	Freq R	Stat (MI)	Collocate
1	4	0	4	8.68900	Generations
2	7	2	5	5.09037	Growth
3	7	3	4	4.56090	Economic
4	4	1	3	3.76301	Investment
5	4	2	2	2.48346	Government

Over the course of this period, the needs of future generations are invoked as a means to justify politically unpopular decisions such as sizeable cuts to public expenditure. This is best exemplified by the following statement made by Lenihan during the height of the economic crisis on the subject of budget deficits, claiming that "if we fail, refuse or neglect to address this structural problem we will condemn this and future generations to the folly of excessive borrowing." (Lenihan, 2009, [Budget Speech]). The needs of future generations are also invoked in subsequent years, as seen in the following emotive statement by Noonan which seeks to contextualise the present difficulties of implementing fiscal consolidation:

What the people of Ireland have endured has been tough and almost without precedent in the developed world. That we will come through it - and we will - is a significant shared achievement for our people. In time, future generations will be proud that we, as a people, tackled this crisis head on. There remain difficult challenges ahead of us but Ireland and her people will prosper again (Noonan, 2012, [Budget Speech]).

As the analysis demonstrates, each period offers unique insights into the way the future is not only constructed, but also limited by the confines of discourse. We now conclude with a series of observations derived from the preceding analysis.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

One of the clearest observations one can see from the collocates which emerge from the analysis is the strong link between the future and the concept of economic growth. Whilst this is hardly surprising given the genre of texts in question, it is worth noting the fixity of this configuration, a configuration of signifiers which carry across social-democratic and neoliberal discourses articulating growth as both a necessary and beneficial goal for the future. That this underlying assumption is never called into question is worthy of note given decades of prominent literature critical of this assumption (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004; Martínez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien, & Zaccai, 2010; Meadows, Meadows, Behrens, & Randers, 1974).

Another important observation concerns a rhetorical point of similarity between Periods B and D, both of which are comprised of speeches delivered during periods of significant economic turmoil. The similarity in question concerns the invocation of danger to children or future generations as a rhetorical means to justify cuts to public expenditure.

A final observation worthy of note is that visions of the future are constrained by the dominant discourse of the period in question. We see that a successful future during the period of social democratic discourse is pursued by navigating an antagonism between fiscal stimulus and inflation, whilst under neoliberal variants the same goal is pursued by eschewing current budget deficits and emphasising the role of competitiveness. Discursive change over the forty-five year period is neither clean nor mechanistic, rather it appears as a protracted series of movements between a hegemonic discourse increasingly incapable of meaningfully articulating phenomena it in a credible manner and an emergent discourse which offers a new, credible means of articulation.

In conclusion, we are reminded of the following quote by Gramsci (2000) which attempts to draw an analogy between the complex, non-mechanistic interplay of economic crises and superstructural change by likening this process to the role of artillery barrages in trench warfare:

> The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare. In war it would sometimes happen that a fierce artillery attack seemed to have destroyed the enemy's entire defensive system, whereas in fact it had only destroyed the outer perimeter; and at the moment of their advance and attack the assailants would find themselves confronted by a line of defence which was still effective. The same thing happens in politics, during great economic crises (p.227).

We contend that discourse functions in much the same manner over the period in question, whilst an economic crisis does not lead to the collapse of a given discourse, it can disrupt the operation of the hegemonic discourse enough to open the discursive field to new, competing articulations of the future for better or worse.

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