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The discursive construction of gender and agency in the linguistic landscape of Ireland's 2018 abortion referendum campaign

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ABSTRACT

In a 2018 referendum, the Irish electorate voted in favour of repealing Ireland's quasi-total legal ban on abortion. The referendum campaign saw important public discussions regarding gender roles in twenty-first century Ireland. While the constitutional ban on abortion was condemned by abortion rights advocates for marginalising women's agency, the legislation which replaced it has not escaped criticism either. Therefore, questions surrounding the conceptualisation of women's agency in the 2018 referendum are still relevant today. Adopting a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach, this paper analyses signage from the weeks before the vote to examine the discursive construction of women's agency in the linguistic landscape of the referendum campaign. I argue that many mainstream campaign organisations – including those arguing for liberalisation of abortion laws – were complicit in the discursive diminishment of women's agency, suggesting that the campaign did not necessarily challenge prevailing ideologies of gender and agency.

KEYWORDS

Multimodal critical discourse analysis; linguistic landscapes; agency; gender; abortion; Ireland

Introduction

On 25th May 2018, voters in the Republic of Ireland passed a referendum proposal to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, thus lifting Ireland's near-total constitutional ban on abortion. As the world witnesses a surge in anti-abortion policy (e.g. the United States, Poland), the Irish referendum campaign saw abortion restrictions lifted. This was a moment of great social and political significance, speaking to the huge changes in women's roles in Irish society over the last 40 years and representing a marked break with the earlier history of the Irish state, characterised by conservative attitudes to women's bodies and rights.

Yet, despite the success of the referendum campaign, questions remain around the extent to which it succeeded in normalising conversations around abortion, women's bodily autonomy and gender roles in Irish society more broadly. While the constitutional ban on abortion was condemned by abortions rights advocates for marginalising

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women's agency (e.g. Smyth, 2015), the legislation which replaced it has not escaped criticism either (see De Londras, 2020). Therefore, questions surrounding the conceptualisation of women's agency in the 2018 referendum are still relevant today.

This paper will examine the discursive construction of women's agency in the linguistic landscape (LL) of the referendum campaign. The analysis draws on Duranti's (2004) distinction between the performance and encoding of agency, Ahearn's (2010) concept of 'meta-agentive discourse' and feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005). Adopting a feminist critical discourse analytic lens (Lazar, 2005, 2007), I analyse signage from the weeks before the vote and argue that LL items adopted one of three discursive approaches: they framed women as (1) lacking in agency (even in the ideal, post-repeal future Ireland envisioned during the campaign), (2) as active agents resisting the structures imposed upon them, or (3) as lacking in agency, but with a view to critiquing this situation. Many official campaign organisations – including those arguing for liberalisation of abortion laws – were complicit in the discursive diminishment of women's agency, suggesting that the campaign did not necessarily challenge prevailing ideologies of gender and agency as thoroughly as it might have done.

Abortion in Ireland: The Eighth Amendment, the 2018 referendum campaign and post-2018 legislation

Abortion has been criminalised in Ireland since the Offences Against the Person Act, 1861. Following a 1983 referendum, an amendment acknowledging the equal right to life of 'the unborn' and 'the mother' was added to the Constitution of Ireland. Article 40.3.3°, or the 'Eighth Amendment', in practice made for a near-total ban on abortion in the state. More than 170,000 pregnant people travelled to England between 1980 and 2018 to obtain a termination (IFPA, n.d.), while thousands more each year ordered safe but illegal abortion pills online (Aiken et al., 2017).¹ Momentum for legalisation of abortion in Ireland began to build in 2012, when 17-week pregnant Savita Halappanavar died from septicæmia at University Hospital Galway after being denied a termination; her death can be viewed as a turning point in the push for legalisation of abortion in Ireland, as she became a symbol which galvanised the campaign for abortion rights. The grassroots REPEAL movement played a major role in the push for the repeal of the Eighth Amendment and, following several years of growing political pressure, in September 2017 then-Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar announced that a referendum on the issue was planned for the following year (RTÉ, 2017). The vote took place on 25th May 2018, with early March to late May 2018 seeing the most intense period of campaigning. The final result of the referendum was a decisive 66.4% in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment (a 'Yes' vote), 33.6% against (a 'No' vote) (Referendum Commission, 2018).

The Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 was signed into law and abortion services became available in Ireland from January 2019, with 6666 terminations carried out in the state in 2019, the first year of the service, and 6577 in 2020 (Department of Health, 2020, 2021). However, concerns have been raised in relation to the law's implications for equitable access and pregnant peoples' agency. Only 385 GPs (11% of a total 3496) and 11 out of 19 maternity units in the country offer full abortion services (HSE, 2021; National Women's Council, 2021). Although the 2019 legislation allows 'a pregnant woman' to access abortion services without regard to reason up to twelve weeks'

incubation, from twelve weeks abortion is legal only when there is a risk of serious harm to the woman's health, life or a fatal diagnosis for the foetus. The legislation also stipulates a mandatory 3-day waiting period between appointments, in case a woman 'changes her mind', a policy critiqued by many as paternalistic and demeaning (De Londras, 2020). There have also been calls for exclusion zones in the vicinity of clinics where abortion services are provided to prevent the harassment of those accessing the services by anti-abortion campaigners holding vigils and protests (Cullen, 2020). Due to these impediments, the need to travel abroad has not been entirely eliminated: 375 women terminating a pregnancy in British clinics had an address in the Republic of Ireland in 2019, a decrease of 87% with respect to the 2879 terminations in 2018 (Department of Health & Social Care, 2020).² These issues around abortion access in Ireland mean that pregnant peoples' agency remains constrained when it comes to exercising their bodily autonomy.

Theoretical framework: agency and discourse

This study seeks to analyse the discursive construction of women's agency in the LL. Ahearn (2010, p. 28) defines agency as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act'. Previous studies of the linguistic construction of women's agency have examined the role of grammatical features such as transitivity, pronouns, voice and semantic roles (Barca, 2018; Karimullah, 2020; Ndambuki & Janks, 2010). Yet Ahearn (2010) cautions that grammatical definitions of agency do not necessarily overlap with social definitions of agency; the use of passive voice in a text cannot be transparently read in terms of a lack of agency, for example, although this will be relevant in certain cases. It is also important to ask exactly whose agency is being constructed, and by whom. Research has focused both on how women's agency is portrayed, for example in media coverage of rape trials or anti-sexist picture-books for children (Barca, 2018; Netz & Kuzar, 2020), as well as from 'bottom-up' perspectives concerned with how women construct their own agency (Cresswell, 2017; Mills & Jones, 2014).

This discussion of agency in the referendum campaign's LL will draw on Duranti's (2004) distinction between the performance and encoding of agency:

[T]he two dimensions are in fact mutually constitutive, that is, it is usually the case that performance – the enacting of agency, its coming into being – relies on and simultaneously affects the encoding – how human action is depicted through linguistic means. (2004, p. 454)

I will also make use of Ahearn's (2010) concept of 'meta-agentive discourse', referring to 'how people talk about agency – how they talk about their own actions and others' actions, how they attribute responsibility for events, how they describe their own and others' decision-making processes' (Ahearn, 2010, p. 41).

From a theoretical point of view, this analysis adopts a feminist critical discourse analytic lens (Lazar, 2005, 2007), which aims to uncover how 'taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged' (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). This entails uncovering the ideologies implicit in the referendum campaign discourse: whereas in some cases women's agency is quite overtly marginalised, in other cases superficially progressive or even feminist arguments rest on assumptions of women as victims or passive recipients of the benevolent care of the state, for example.

Data and methods

This study approaches the discursive construction of agency from a linguistic landscape perspective, which ‘attempts to understand the motives, uses, ideologies, language varieties and contestations of multiple forms of ‘languages’ as they are displayed in public spaces’ (Gorter, 2019 n.p.). As such, the primary data for this study consists of 1680 ‘signs’ (in the broadest understanding of the term, including posters, stickers, banners, etc.) photographed in the weeks and months preceding the vote. In order to capture the diversity of stances, materials and media on display in the referendum campaign’s LL, I follow Sebba (2010) in analysing both fixed and mobile signage: this includes campaign posters tied to lamp-posts, hand-written postcards displayed on walls, (non-mobile) stickers, badges worn on clothing and other wearable items bearing slogans, placards from demonstrations (both pro- and anti-repeal), as well as other ‘ephemera’ such as leaflets. Data collection was conducted in a number of locations across Ireland (Dublin, Greystones, Dingle, Tralee, Limerick city, Cork city, Boyle, and Sligo town), although signage from Dublin predominates. The data constitute a deliberately heterogenous array of different LL items, representative of the diversity of stances, materials and media on display in the referendum campaign’s LL; in particular, this data allows for comparison of discourses in professionally-produced signage from registered campaign organisations and messages scrawled on cardboard by demonstration-goers.

A LL approach, with its particular attention to the participation frameworks which lead to the design, production and display of signage (Goffman, 1981; Lou, 2016) and both top-down and bottom-up discursive flows (Ben-Rafael, 2009; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006), allows for an analysis of different constructions of agency within the same system (see Kallen, 2010). Whereas earlier incarnations of LL research focused on the quantitative analysis of the language on signs (e.g. Backhaus, 2007), this study draws on more discursively-oriented approaches (Blommaert, 2013; Blommaert & Maly, 2015; Lou, 2016; Milani, 2014). Moreover, the LL is perhaps the most public form of language use: not only was a public conversation taking place on an issue which has always been taboo, but the weeks before the vote saw posters discussing abortion appear on practically every street corner in Ireland. The transformation of Ireland’s public conversation around abortion through the transformation of Ireland’s public space motivates a specifically LL approach to this topic.

I adopt a multimodal approach to analysis which draws on social semiotic, geosemiotic and multimodal critical discourse analytic (MCDA) traditions (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Ledin & Machin, 2018; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). This involves analysing visual features of signage such as gaze, colour or choices to visibly include or exclude particular types of social actors (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002, 2006), as well as the physical placement of signage in space (Scollon & Scollon, 2003), a central concern of LL research. I also draw on Fairclough’s (2003, pp. 145–150) critical discourse analytic tools for the analysis of the representation of social actors; the discursive features which grammatically mark these dimensions of agency include the nominalisation of processes to background social actors, their syntactic and semantic roles, or even their inclusion in (or exclusion from) discourse altogether.

The analysis which follows is structured in three sub-sections, according to the three ways in which women were represented in the LL: (1) lacking in agency (even in the ideal, post-repeal future Ireland envisioned during the campaign), (2) as active agents

resisting the structures imposed upon them, or (3) as lacking in agency, but with a view to critiquing this situation.

Analysis

Lack of agency

In the first instance, there were signs which minimised the agency of social actors. Bar some exceptional examples of home-made signage which framed the anti-repeal position in feminist terms, the vast majority of signage produced by those campaigning for a *No* vote (i.e. anti-repeal) focused on '(unborn) children'.³ Even when women are represented in signage, the 'child' is invariably the central concern. The use of the terms 'mothers' and 'children' over 'women' and 'foetuses' is not trivial: participants in an experiment who read a text with the term 'foetus' indicated more admissible attitudes towards abortion than those who read a text with the term 'child' (Mikołajczak & Bilewicz, 2015). Building on Browne and Nash's (2020) analysis of a handful of anti-repeal ephemera (e.g. car stickers) in the 2018 referendum campaign, I will detail the variety of different ways in which women are marginalised and the foetus centred in the data.

Figure 1, a *Love Both* poster from Tralee (Co. Kerry), both literally and metaphorically centres the 'child', with an image of a new-born baby in white swaddling clothes accompanied by the message *NO / ABORTION ON DEMAND*. The concept of *ABORTION ON DEMAND* implies a frivolousness or lack of reflection on the part of those choosing to have an abortion (O'Rourke, 2016). While other *No* signage includes images of children and adults looking directly at the reader (see below), the baby in this poster is presented as a passive agent at the mercy of the reader, similar to the subservient 'offer gaze' of participants in images who are presented as objects of the reader's gaze (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). The depiction of the foetus as a new-born – as opposed to a less fully-formed foetus (see below) – serves to cement the personhood of the foetus. The grey, white and pink colour-scheme is low in saturation and purity, with the pink adding warmth appropriate for an image of a sleeping child, combining to index an unfrontational stance and a lower emotive temperature (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). This unfrontational colour-scheme works alongside the image to suggest the vulnerability of a defenceless child. The implicit connection of a new-born child with a flippant attitude regarding abortion, through the co-presence of text and image, suggests that this poses a threat to children such as those pictured. Such emotive discourse was commonplace during the referendum campaign, with O'Donovan and Siller's (2021) findings suggesting that appealing to emotions was the most frequent strategy of discursive legitimisation in the referendum campaign's LL. The cost of this highly affective moral panic focusing on 'children' is the lack of any consideration of pregnant people within this discourse.

Figure 2, a poster in Dublin city-centre produced by *Save the 8th*, frames the referendum in terms of the *Unborn Baby*, without any reference to 'women' (or indeed 'pregnant people'). Although Figure 2 includes an image of (at least part of) a woman's body, it dehumanises the woman by framing her (in a literal sense, given that the poster cuts off the person's head and hands) as a container for the 'unborn child'. This is not a visual trope restricted to official campaign posters, as demonstrated by Figures 3 and



Figure 1. Love Both poster; Tralee, Co. Kerry.

4, both placards from the Rally for Life in March 2018. The image of the outline of a female body containing a foetus within a heart-shaped womb in [Figure 3](#) provides a visual parallel to the Irish phrase *Níl aon tínteán mar do thínteán féin* ('No place like home', lit. 'There is no hearth like your own hearth'), framing the female body as simply the 'home' housing the foetus: inanimate, lacking in agency itself. In [Figure 4](#), however, even the outline of the female body is no longer represented, with the womb now a disembodied circular container for the foetus.



Figure 2. *Save the 8th* campaign poster; Parnell Square, Dublin.

In other cases, though, women were not depicted as mere containers, but were nevertheless defined by their relationship to 'children', often being stereotyped as mothers. [Figure 5](#), a poster in south Dublin produced by the political party Renua and reading *BE MY VOICE*, seeks to frame repeal of the Eighth Amendment as harmful for both 'mothers' and 'babies'. As with the *Love Both* campaign, the image of a woman holding a child here casts women primarily (or exclusively) as mothers. In fact, the image of a child depicted in [Figure 5](#) is remarkably similar to that in [Figure 1](#): a new-born baby in 'pure', white clothing, symbolic of innocence and fragility. These visual cues of infant helplessness are supplemented by the directive *BE MY VOICE*: although in this case the sign in question – specifically, the child depicted in the sign – is addressing a voter to demand that they vote to retain the Eighth Amendment on behalf of those who do not have a



Figure 3. *Níl aon tínteán mar do thínteán féin* ('There's no place like home') placard.



Figure 4. Abortion STOPS a BEATING heart placard.



Figure 5. Renua poster; Donnybrook Road, D4, Dublin.

vote (i.e. children), the underlying message which emerges from the combination of text and image is that to be a 'good mother' is to 'be my voice', which in turn involves voting *No* in the referendum. By constructing an ideal mother figure (one which is dependent on voting the 'right' way), *Love Both* posters therefore reproduced ideologies of traditional femininity (inextricably tied to motherhood) and downgraded women's agency.

Although not nearly as egregious as the marginalisation of women in *No* signage, *Yes* (i.e. pro-repeal) signage was also liable to downgrade women's agency. For example,

Figure 6, a poster in Boyle (Co. Roscommon) produced by *Together for Yes* (an umbrella organisation representing a coalition of different campaign groups and political parties advocating repeal), reads *Yes for Care*. The nominalisation of *Care* is particularly relevant here: Fairclough (2003, p. 143) notes that nominalisation (in English) involves the loss of grammatical features found on verbs such as tense, modality and person. Although this nominalisation allows Figure 6 to remain trans-inclusive in its messaging, in line with the broader approach of the *Together for Yes* campaign group, it serves to exclude



Figure 6. *Together for Yes* poster; Boyle, Co. Roscommon.

social actors from discourse. The issue of abortion access is framed as a question of ‘caring for’ pregnant people: in terms of semantic roles, those being ‘cared for’ are implicitly the patients, framed as passive recipients of ‘care’ (presumably, on behalf of the state or health service) rather than active agents making a decision. This discursive approach is consistent with De Londras (2020, p. 43) description of the current legal framework in Ireland, whereby ‘abortion is bestowed by the state – not demanded by respect for the rights of the pregnant woman, her agency and her reproductive autonomy’. In other words, this analysis demonstrates the continuity between referendum campaign discourse in 2018 and the post-referendum legal framework.

A similar positioning is at play in both Figures 7 and 8. In Figure 7, a Labour Party poster in Westland Row (Dublin city-centre), the third-person direct object pronouns in the message *SUPPORT HER / DON'T EXPORT HER* position women both syntactically and semantically as passive recipients of assistance. Fairclough (2003, p. 145) distinguishes between activated and passivated social actors, which correspond to ‘the Actor in processes (loosely, the one who does things and makes things happen), or the Affected or Beneficiary (loosely, the one affected by processes)’, respectively. In Figure 7, women are passivated, whether as Affected (by being ‘exported’) or Beneficiary (by being ‘supported’). There is no sense in which women are agentive social actors either in 2018 (i.e. before repeal of the Eighth Amendment), when women are apparently ‘exported’, nor even in the idealised future post-referendum where women will be ‘supported’ (comparable to being ‘cared for’).

In Figure 8, a Green Party poster in Glasnevin (a north Dublin suburb), the second person possessive pronouns in the message *Your sister / Your daughter / Your friend* also position women as the object of the reader’s attention, rather than speaking from a woman’s perspective, or ‘as a woman’. However, in this case the poster also includes an image of a woman staring directly at the viewer. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) framework for analysing interactions between viewers and represented participants in an image, the close-up shot of a woman’s shoulders and head constitutes close or intimate social distance – appropriate given the appeal to *Your sister / Your daughter / Your friend*. The demand gaze of the represented participant, from a frontal angle and directly at the viewer, ‘creates a visual form of direct address [which] acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual “you”’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 117). This gaze ‘demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 118). While the exact nature of this relation is not specified due to the represented participant’s neutral expression (whereas, for example, a smiling expression would suggest affinity with the viewer), the viewer is clearly being asked to *TRUST HER* and *VOTE YES*. That the woman’s gaze is positioned at the viewer’s eye-level indicates equality of power relations between the represented participant and the viewer (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The image is neither deferential nor is there any aggressive demand being made of the viewer (as there would be if the image included a scowling face with a finger pointing at the viewer, for example).

By contrast, the ‘offer gaze’ (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) of the doting mother represented in Figure 5 (above), not engaging with the viewer but instead focusing all her attention on the child in the image, visually suggests the woman’s passivation with respect to the viewer – there to be contemplated as visual object. Figure 8’s image



Figure 7. Labour Party poster; Westland Row, Dublin.

interacts with the sign's text to present the viewer with a woman who could easily be *Your sister*, for example. Although there is a greater sense of agency in [Figure 8](#) than in [Figure 5](#), given the implication that the represented participant is asking something of the viewer, the viewer is nevertheless positioned as the subject contemplating their *sister, daughter or friend*, positioned as object.

The passivation of social actors – in other words, the diminishment of women's agency – is not restricted to official campaign posters; it can also be found in the *Notes to Savita*



Figure 8. Green Party campaign poster; Mobhi Road, Dublin.

data, a set of cards, written by members of the public and addressed to Savita Halappanavar, which appeared on a wall in Dublin following the referendum vote. In [Figure 9](#), which reads *Ireland failed you, the health service failed you but we fail no more*, Halappanavar is the syntactic object and the semantic patient of the verb(s) *fail*; she is framed as the helpless victim of Ireland's failing, rather than as an individual who actively sought but was denied an abortion.

It is perhaps not surprising that notes addressed to Halappanavar position her as the object of the message, nor that Halappanavar – or any woman – should be framed as victims, as many undoubtedly suffered due to the Eighth Amendment. However, this

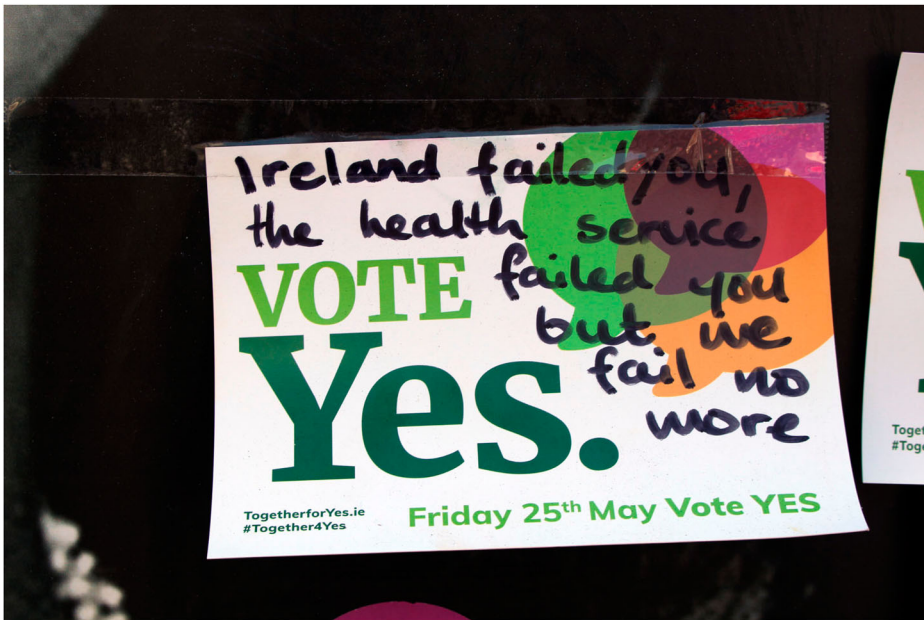


Figure 9. Notes to Savita card; Richmond Street South, Dublin.

framing is widespread in the *Notes to Savita*. Examples 1–6 in Table 1 show how Halappanavar and other women are framed as Affected (Fairclough, 2003), passive victims of Ireland’s failings. This framing was complemented by the repeated appeals to *compassion*, evidenced by examples 6–8. As discussed above, the positioning of women as the passive recipients of the Irish public’s ‘care’ and ‘compassion’, rather than as active, agentive subjects who have been prevented from accessing abortion by Ireland’s constitutional ban, implicitly backgrounds their agency.

This analysis does not entirely align with McDonnell and Murphy’s (2019) examination of the Irish media’s framing of Halappanavar’s death, which argued that media reactions to Halappanavar’s death sought to constrain public debate and maintain the conservatism which had characterised attitudes towards abortion. However, this conservatism is at least partially reflected in the more ‘grassroots’ commentaries analysed here, which by no means favour an agentive framing. That the examples in Table 1 are messages on hand-written notes stuck to the wall next to the Halappanavar mural suggests that this discourse was not only present in official campaign posters, but individual sign-makers

Table 1. (Examples of the passivation of women in Notes to Savita data).

1	I am sorry Ireland failed you. I am so glad we now have ‘Savitas law’
2	So sorry you died on our watch
3	We failed you Savita. Never again.
4	I’m so SORRY FOR WHAT OUR COUNTRY DID TO YOU
5	Im sorry we were too late. Im sorry my country took your life. Thank you for changing mine, and the lives of all Irish women.
6	Thank you for helping us to grow in compassion. Sorry for all the pain caused to you and your loved ones.
7	COMPASSION WON!
8	TOGETHER WE DID IT! LOVE TO ALL THOSE COMPASSIONATE PEEPS WHO VOTED YES FOR US WOMEN. MY HEART IS WITH YOU!

were engaging with and reproducing it, whether they internalised the ‘care’ and ‘compassion’ discourse which was particularly prominent during the lead-up to the vote or this was an ‘organic’ way for voters to conceptualise the referendum question.

Although the *Notes to Savita* celebrated the change in the status quo as a result of the vote, at least some of these messages also reproduced the lack of agency which is part of the hegemonic gender order, or the ideological status quo (Lazar, 2005). Indeed, other framings were also possible in the *Notes to Savita*: for example, the message *So that all the women of Ireland can feel safe, in making their choice* positions women as agentive subjects with the ability to choose for themselves (following changes in the structural conditions to facilitate this, i.e. the change in the constitution following the vote).

Among the signs which framed women as lacking in agency in the LL, while the focus on ‘children’ in much *No* signage was perhaps to be expected, it is notable that *Yes* signage tended to speak *about* women rather than *from the perspective of* women; both discursive approaches resulted in the marginalisation of women’s agency. Therefore, while the discursive foci of the *Yes* and *No* campaigns were different, it is necessary to pay attention to the specific ways in which these discursive foci were framed. Even though *Yes* posters may have made gender a salient issue in the referendum campaign’s LL, in some cases they minimised women’s agency through the specific ways in which women were represented.

Women as agentive

There were, however, alternative framings of women’s agency in the referendum campaign’s LL. Figures 10–12 are written from the perspective of women and frame women as agentive subjects. The central message of Figure 10, a poster in Dublin city-centre produced by left-wing political party People Before Profit, reads *OUR BODIES OUR CHOICE VOTE YES*, with *TRUST WOMEN* and *REPEAL THE 8TH* above and below this central message, respectively. *TRUST WOMEN* positions ‘women’ as syntactic object and semantic patient, or in Fairclough’s (2003) terms a passivated social actor (see Figure 8). That said, it is agency itself which Figure 10 asks the reader to give to women by ‘trusting them’. The message *OUR BODIES OUR CHOICE VOTE YES* is afforded prominence through its placement in the central portion of the sign (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). This central message explicitly positions the reader as the object of a message written from the perspective of women as subjects. This integrates both the ego-affirming level of agency – as in Figure 10 women are positioned as the authors of the sign (Goffman, 1981) – and the grammatical encoding of agency, as the first-person possessive pronouns link the ‘speaking’ subject to the political claim regarding bodily autonomy.

Figures 11 and 12, both signs from the March for Choice (a pro-repeal rally held in Dublin on International Women’s Day, March 2018) also integrate the performance and encoding dimensions of agency, albeit in a more immediate way. Figure 11 reads *#TIME4-CHOICE / HEAR OUR VOICES / RESPECT OUR VOICES*, while Figure 12 reads *My eggs My Omelette*, a play on the popular pro-choice slogan *My Body My Choice*. Whereas Figure 10 is a campaign poster attached to a lamppost, Figures 11 and 12 both index the individuals who can be seen holding them (intentionally blurred or cropped out in the Figures presented here in order to preserve their anonymity), and thus the signs can be understood as speaking for them or on their behalf.⁴ Therefore, these messages are not only



Figure 10. People Before Profit poster; St. Stephen's Green, Dublin.

positioned from the perspective of women generally, but specifically the individuals holding these signs. This underscores the importance of the geosemiotic dimension of signage (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). The spatial co-occurrence of the sign itself and the sign's presumed principal (i.e. the individual holding the sign, whose views the sign represents) in Figures 11 and 12 may also be taken as an emphatic performance of the ego-affirming level of agency (Duranti, 2004), in that the possessive pronouns *our* and *my* index concrete, immediately-present bodies. Parallel to Duranti's (2004) outline of the



Figure 11. ROSA banner.

grammatical encoding of agency in language, I suggest that this can be conceptualised in terms of the grammatical encoding of agency *in space*, according to Scollon and Scollon's (2003) understanding of space as a semiotic system with a grammar of its own. The spatial dimension should therefore also be considered relevant to the representation of agency.

Figure 13 is a further example of the multimodal encoding of agency. It shows a mural by street artist Giant Sigh, sponsored by the Irish Civil Liberties Association (Falvey, 2018), next to *BANG BANG*, a café in Phibsborough, north Dublin. The Giant Sigh mural references 'Rosie the Riveter', a factory worker depicted in the 'We Can Do It' poster synonymous with the American war effort during WWII, since become a feminist symbol (Kimble & Olson, 2006). The representation of Rosie the Riveter here is comparable to that of the represented participant in Figure 8. Both look directly at the viewer with a demand gaze, engaging the viewer in social interaction. Although Rosie the Riveter's body is turned away slightly so that it faces the viewer at an oblique angle, this is not to signal detachment from the viewer (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), but to facilitate the tensing of her bicep, revealing a tattoo with the *REPEAL* symbol, designed by Dublin street artist, Maser.⁵ This powerful gesture signals her commitment and determination to the cause of repealing the Eighth Amendment. The neutral expression of the woman in Figure 8, however, lends itself more to contemplation by the viewer, even though both represented participants engage the viewer with relatively neutral expressions and demand gazes at eye-level, indexing equality of power relations between viewer and represented participant (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Although not necessarily demanding anything of the viewer, the representation of Rosie the Riveter in Figure 13 is more in line with an agentic model of women's participation in the referendum campaign: she is framed as strong and powerful, while also calm and measured, playing an active role in repealing of the Eighth Amendment.

These signs demonstrate that alternative framings of agency were indeed possible in the referendum campaign's LL, suggesting that those representations of women as lacking in agency were, at least to some extent, deliberate discursive choices. The signs



Figure 12. *My eggs My Omelette* placard.

which did frame social actors agentively were often the 'bottom-up' signs produced by individuals or marginal political groups, whereas mainstream political parties and campaign groups tended to reproduce discourses which did not foreground women's agency.

Signage critiquing a lack of agency under the Eighth Amendment

Thus far, I have distinguished between signs which diminish women's agency and those which represent women as agentive. However, this binary distinction is overly simplistic. Social actors are not entirely free to act as they wish: considering the definition of agency as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2010, p. 28), agency should always be considered in dialogic interaction with the social structures which may facilitate or constrain agency (Ahearn, 2010; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003). This



Figure 13. *Rosie the Riveter* mural; Leinster Street North, Dublin.

is particularly relevant in the context of abortion access. While some signs background women's agency regarding their decision to seek an abortion, other representations of women as lacking in agency are rooted in a critique of the legal framework prior to the vote.

Figure 14 is a ROSA poster which reads *STOP POLICING MY BODY*. In terms of the grammatical encoding of agency, the first-person pronoun *MY* positions this sign from the perspective of a pregnant person, while the imperative suggests a commanding stance vis-à-vis the reader – the represented participant as speaking subject and reader as addressee. On the other hand, *MY BODY* is the grammatical object and semantic patient of the verb *POLICING*. Additionally, the body is represented in ways which visually suggest a lack of agency. Although the framing of the torso and the exclusion of the figure's head draws the viewer's focus to the part of the body being 'policed', this focus on the torso (and by implication the uterus) is used in *No* signage to emphasise the personhood of the foetus to the detriment of pregnant people's agency. The figure's body posture is also somewhat deferential, with hands behind their back as if handcuffed. There is therefore a tension between (linguistic and visual) indexes of agency and lack of agency in Figure 14, which acknowledges the ideal agency of the represented participant but also the current constraints on it due to the Eighth Amendment. Although the performance and encoding of agency are relevant to this analysis, Figure 14 is also an example of 'meta-agentive discourse' (Ahearn, 2010). It constitutes a commentary on the lack of agency currently experienced by those seeking abortions when they come up against the Eighth Amendment (i.e. that bodies are currently policed), demanding instead that



Figure 14. ROSA poster; Phibsborough Road, Dublin.

barriers to the fulfilment of bodily autonomy should be removed (i.e. that the reader – or society at large – should stop policing bodies).

Figure 15, a placard from the March for Choice in Dublin whose text reads *TIME'S UP REPEAL*, parallels Figure 14 in also using visual semiotics to critique a lack of agency due to the Eighth Amendment. It shows a pair of hands in handcuffs stylised as an 8. This visual metaphor makes a clear point: that the Eighth Amendment serves to constrain agency, the constitutional equivalent of handcuffs. Figure 15 demonstrates that this critique of women's lack of agency due to the Eighth Amendment is a discourse which exists both in official campaign posters (produced by certain groups, e.g. ROSA) and hand-made placards at demonstrations.

There are also ambiguous LL items which may have potentially opposing meanings depending on reader uptake. According to a social semiotic model of communication (Kress, 2010), each sign is a prompt which is interpreted by a reader/viewer; the prompt conditions but does not entirely determine its interpretation. A reader therefore plays an active role in the construction of meaning via the act of interpretation. Figures 16–18 show a mural being created by members of SUBSET, a Dublin-based street art collective. Figure 16 was taken in the early evening of Tuesday 21st May 2018, several days before the vote. Figure 17 shows the same mural later that night, now completed to read *HER BODY HER CHOICE*. Finally, Figure 18 shows the mural on Thursday 23rd May 2018, with a bold red *NO* added at some point in the intervening two days. Given the time-lapse



Figure 15. TIME'S UP placard.

between the apparent completion of the mural and the addition of the red *NO*, it is possible to interpret the *NO* as a rejection of the original message added by a *No* campaigner (in contrast to the pro-repeal stance implicit in *HER BODY HER CHOICE*). Colour can be used to 'link elements that would otherwise be of different kinds, create bonds or contrasts, evoke moods and associations' (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 49; cited in O'Donovan & Siller, 2021, p. 5). The visual semiotic link between the red colouring of much *No* signage and the bold, red *NO* in Figure 18 would support this reading.

However, the careful placement of the red *NO* over the second possessive pronoun, *HER*, rather than over the entire mural, suggests that its syntactic scope extends only to the modifier of *CHOICE*, as opposed to the entire utterance. *NO* can therefore be interpreted as a replacement for *HER* rather than as a negation of the entire message. From this perspective, the message *HER BODY NO CHOICE* is transformed from a declaration of the right to bodily autonomy into a protest against a lack of agency. This can be interpreted either as a bleak description of the situation in Ireland at the time (i.e. pre-referendum) or as an assertion that women should have no choice. A reader will interpret the propositional content of the message based on whether they understand it as an assertion referring to



Figure 16. SUBSET mural, in progress; Camden Row, Dublin.

a real-Ireland in the present where agency is constrained due to the Eighth Amendment, or as the expression of a desire for a future, ideal-Ireland where agency would remain constrained and abortion illegal. In turn, this will lead a reader to classify [Figure 18](#) as advocating either a Yes or No vote, respectively.⁶ Many readers apparently understood the *NO* as advocating a *No* vote, whether *NO* was understood as replacing *HER* exclusively or negating the entire message, although media reports at the time suggested that this addition was part of the planned mural and carried out by SUBSET themselves (Fitzmaurice, 2018).



Figure 17. SUBSET mural, ‘completed’; Camden Row, Dublin.

Proceeding on the assumption that [Figure 18](#) represents a critique of women’s lack of agency, it constitutes a salient example of ‘meta-agentive discourse’. Although it uses a third-person pronoun (*HER*) rather than speaking from a woman’s point of view, and therefore arguably lacks the ‘ego-affirming’ level of agency (Duranti, 2004), it is necessary to distinguish LL items such as [Figure 18](#) from those discussed earlier in this section, which also framed women as lacking in agency, but neglected any explicit critique of



Figure 18. SUBSET mural with red NO; Camden Row, Dublin.

this lack of agency. Notably, [Figure 18](#) also uses the word *CHOICE*, which was avoided by some mainstream campaign organisations.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the construction of agency in the 2018 referendum campaign's LL. I have argued that mainstream campaign organisations often framed women as

somehow lacking in agency – even in the ideal, post-referendum Ireland – although this framing was also widespread in the *Notes to Savita* data. Notably, this category of signs included both *Yes* and *No* signage. Other signs, particularly demonstration-goers’ hand-made (and hand-held) placards, were positioned from women’s perspectives and more forcefully presented women as active agents resisting the structures imposed upon them. A final category of signs also represented women as lacking in agency due to the Eighth Amendment, but with a view to critiquing this situation.

While there are a multiplicity of different approaches and stances when it comes to representing agency in referendum discourse, these are not equally distributed throughout the LL, with certain framings more or less salient in certain types of signage (e.g. women portrayed as lacking agency in official campaign posters). This suggests that the referendum campaign did not challenge prevailing ideologies of gender and agency as fully as it might have. While the *Yes* campaign were undoubtedly successful in securing a remarkable referendum result, questions remain regarding the extent to which the campaign served to open up a broader discussion around how bodily autonomy and agency should be conceptualised in this new Ireland. From a FCDA perspective, this analysis has therefore sought to draw connections between the ideological underpinnings of referendum campaign discourse and the obstacles to accessing abortion services in Ireland: the post-2018 legal framework which still constrains pregnant peoples’ agency in Ireland is not a break with the discursive marginalisation of agency in 2018, but ideologically consistent with it.

Notes

1. Following the lead of other scholars (Calkin & Browne, 2020; De Londras, 2020), I use the terminology ‘pregnant people’ when referring to the group of people who are able to become pregnant, including trans and non-binary people, whereas the term ‘women’ refers exclusively to those identifying as cisgender women. Throughout this paper, I assume that all examples are relevant to the construction of women’s agency. In some cases, the language used on signage is gender-neutral, meaning it potentially encompasses the agency of all pregnant people. This paper is interested specifically in the discursive construction of women’s agency, as part of the broader issue of women’s role in Irish society, rather than analysing the inclusivity of referendum campaign discourse per se (which would entail a distinct, although not less worthwhile, research project).
2. In 2020, 194 women (the term used in the reporting of these figures) had an address in the Republic of Ireland; in 2021, 206 women did so (Department of Health & Social Care, 2021, 2022). The significant decrease in numbers in 2020 relative to 2019 are likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic and difficulties travelling from Ireland to Britain. The number of pregnant people registered with an Irish address at British clinics started to decrease as abortion pills became available online (in the early 2000s) and continued to decrease as pills become more widely available, suggesting that abortion pills replaced physical travel across the Irish sea, rather than a decrease in overall numbers of abortions (Aiken et al., 2017; Sheldon, 2016). If it is still necessary for hundreds of pregnant people to travel to Britain to obtain a termination each year, it is also reasonable to assume that terminations are still being carried out in the state via (still illegal) abortion pills, even if this may be a small number.
3. The Rally for Life in March 2018 saw signs reading *A woman has a right to her body, even when she is in the womb* and *I SUPPORT A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO BE BORN*. Superficially ‘pro-woman’ messaging has become increasingly common among anti-abortion groups (Saurette & Gordon, 2016).

4. This does not necessarily assume that the people holding these banners are women, although it is likely that many readers will make this assumption.
5. In 2016, a high-profile mural by street artist Maser reading *Repeal the 8th* (with stylised white lettering inside a red heart) was removed from a wall in Dublin's Temple Bar by Dublin City Council following complaints from anti-repeal activists (McDermott, 2016); it re-appeared in 2018 and was again removed (Holland, 2018). It became an important symbol of the REPEAL movement, particularly in its earlier, grassroots phase (as opposed to *Together for Yes*, for example).
6. If it is assumed that *NO* was added by a *No* supporter with the intended syntactic scope only over *HER*, rather than opposition to the message *HER BODY HER CHOICE* in general, this would constitute an explicit assertion that women should not have a choice. Given how careful the *No* campaign – including both official posters and placards at marches – were to avoid explicitly 'anti-woman' rhetoric, this would appear a particularly strange tactic, suggesting that *NO* is an addition either by SUBSET themselves (or another *Yes* supporter) highlighting women's lack of agency, or by a *No* supporter objecting to the message as a whole. The latter seems less likely, however, when considering the careful placement of the *NO*, as well as the addition of the words *REPEAL THE 8TH* in the bottom-right hand corner of the mural, suggesting that Figure 18 was indeed intended as a critique of a lack of agency.

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