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The language of conflict in Northern Ireland: Gerry Adams vs. Ian Paisley

This doctoral dissertation explores aspects of the language of conflict in Northern Ireland. In this area, the conflict between Unionists and Republicans, Catholic and Protestants has been raging on for centuries, reaching its most recent peak with the 1970s so-called ‘Troubles’. Today, after almost four decades of physical violence, as the peace process unfolds, the fight seems to have moved from paramilitary action onto political debate – a war of words is slowly replacing real war.

For this study, a written corpus has been collected, comprising the annual party conference speeches from the past ten years by the leaders of the two main and opposed political parties of Northern Ireland: the President of the Republican Sinn Féin party, Gerry Adams, and the president of the Protestant Democratic Unionist Party, Ian Paisley. By comparing texts by these politicians, who have been on the Northern Irish scene for over thirty years, it should be possible to observe the development of their discourse from a diachronic perspective.

A Critical Discourse Analysis approach is considered particularly suitable for dealing with political speeches, but contributions from different fields and disciplines are also considered.

The discourse analysis of the texts collected is supported by computer-aided analysis. Two aspects are being focussed on, in particular: 1) the overall influence of language on politics, i.e. how words are used to exercise power; and 2) the use of same/different argumentative structures by the same orators to discuss same/different subjects over the years.

It is hoped that the present study may help clarify aspects of the evolution of political discourse in Northern Ireland, in general, and of the argumentative skills and strategies of the above two politicians, in particular.