

The Potential of Narrative Cinema in Language Ideological Clarification: *Kneecap* (Peppiatt, 2024), Humour and the Irish Language

Sacha Wood

University of Galway, Ireland

Email: s.wood13@universityofgalway.ie

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9222-2568>

Abstract:

The importance of popular culture in language revitalisation is becoming ever clearer, with the Irish language providing a particularly notable example following the recording-breaking public, critical and financial success of feature film *An Cailín Ciúin* (*The Quiet Girl*, Bairéad 2022). The semi-fictionalised music biopic *Kneecap* (Peppiatt, 2024), however, stands out within this growing canon of Irish-language cinema for its explicit engagement with the issue of language rights and revitalisation. Uniting sociolinguistics, humour theory and film studies, this paper will explore how *Kneecap* represents a new possibility for narrative cinema as a site of language ideological clarification (Kroskrity 2009), focusing on the linguistic encounters and resulting dialogues of the character of JJ (JJ Ó Dochartaigh). Exploring vernacular, institutionalised and politicised language use, this paper ultimately argues that the emotional responses and cognitive understandings facilitated by the humorous cinematic narrative allow for a more nuanced and successful staging of language ideological contestation and clarification.

Keywords: Language Ideological Clarification, Irish Language, Film Studies, Humour

The importance of popular culture in language revitalisation is becoming ever clearer, with the Irish language providing a particularly notable example as numbers of speakers rise in response to “social influencers” (Osborne 2025) and “cultural visibility” (Curtin 2026). Writing in 2011, Moriarty and Pietikäinen described popular media as a “public legitimising sphere” (366) for minoritised languages, specifically citing the success of television channel TG4 in creating an “increased positive attitude” (369) towards the Irish language in the Republic of Ireland. In their terms, the “new values and functions” provided through this pop-culture “linguistic environment” confer added “indexical value” onto the language, which in turn influences real-world language practices through its positive alteration of language ideologies (Moriarty and Pietikäinen 2011: 363-68). Upscaling this process to the high-prestige and international medium of cinema, the creation of feature-film funding scheme Cine4 in 2017 marked a watershed moment for the Irish language, with the recording-breaking public, critical and financial success of *An Cailín Ciúin* (*The Quiet Girl*, Bairéad 2022) positioning it as the herald of a new popular language revival (Fox 2022).

Rich Peppiatt’s Belfast-based semi-fictionalised music biopic, *Kneecap* (2024), however, stands out within the canon of Irish-language cinema for its explicit engagement with the issue of language rights and revitalisation. Specifically, *Kneecap* reflects a time of increased awareness of language ideologies due to the much-publicised debate around the establishment of an Irish Language Act, which would grant the language official status in the north of Ireland (Dunlevy 2023). Highlighting this crisis point of contemporary regional politics, the film positions the Irish language as an index of the anachronistic tensions of a supposedly ‘post-conflict’ north and therefore of the ongoing negotiations (and potential solutions) of an unfinished peace process. With this in mind, *Kneecap*’s structure as a polyphony of



characters set against the context of this political struggle can be seen to enact the encounters and dialogues necessary for that which Paul V. Kroskrity has termed “language ideological clarification” (2009). Identifying language renewal activities as “sites” (Silverstein 1998, cited in Kroskrity 2009: 71) of struggle between conflicting language ideologies, Kroskrity delineates the need for language ideological clarification to ensure success within the renewal community. Reading the Irish-language film as such a site, it is through the explicit engagement with this ideological situatedness and debate that *Kneecap* can thus be seen to pave new ground for the relationship between narrative cinema and language revitalisation, employing the popular culture medium as a space for language ideological clarification.

Moreover, *Kneecap*’s equal uniqueness within the canons of Irish-language and northern Irish cinema as a comedic film merits a consideration of Joseph O’Neill (2016)’s argument for the potential of humour in easing hostile language ideologies. In contrast to the indigenous “assembly of pain” (Naxhielly 2022: 46) which Irish-language cinema has arguably heretofore represented, *Kneecap* echoes O’Neill’s espousal of humour to provide an alternative path to linguistic revitalisation. As such, John C. Meyer’s four communicative functions of humour (2000) will form much of the theoretical basis of this paper, in which the “varying degrees” of audience “position” and “familiarity” (317) informing Meyer’s “continuum of humour use” (323) can be roughly aligned with Kroskrity’s emphasis on multiplicity, positionality, and awareness, providing thus a useful analytical framework for reading the humorous Irish-language film as a site of fruitful linguistic revitalisation through language ideological clarification.

A key turning point in the narrative of the biopic is the first encounter between Mo Chara (Liam Óg Ó hAinle) and JJ (JJ Ó Dochartaigh), in which JJ is brought in as an interpreter when Mo Chara refuses to speak English to the police. Providing a fictional catalyst for the real ideological clarification embodied in the band’s formation and creative work, a significant intra-community language ideological encounter occurs when JJ is ordered to translate from Mo Chara’s notebook, where he discovers the lyrics for *Kneecap*’s early song, ‘Amach Anocht’. Emphasised cinematically by the close-up on his surprised and somewhat impressed facial expression, JJ’s emotional response to the lyrics signals a notable change from the character’s previously depicted ambivalence, contrasting the distant self-positioning of his introductory scenes in which he keeps to the back of an activist meeting, leaves the group of Gaelscoil staff gathered around a news report, and substitute-teaches Irish somewhat uncomfortably to an uninterested class of young students. Marked through contrast in this way, this moment of emotional response can thus be read as a clarification of JJ’s own language ideology, in which his self-differentiation from the ideologies of political activism and the education system is brought to consciousness through his uniquely affective encounter with Mo Chara’s novel use of the Irish language.

Based on Ó Dochartaigh’s real teaching experience, JJ’s introductory scene in which he covers an Irish class at the Gaelscoil where he teaches music stages a key linguistic encounter between individual and institution, in which his temporary interpellation into the role of language teacher allows for a bringing-to-awareness both diegetic and metadiegetic of the significant site of ideological contestation that is the education system. In a considerable tonal shift from Mo Chara and Móglaí Bap’s (Naoise Ó Cairealláin) drug-fuelled, hiphouse-soundtracked introductory sequence, the action resumes from the

intercut title logo with a quiet, slow track down from a classroom painting of Cú Chulainn to an unimpressed-looking JJ, who proceeds to lead a class of bored teenage students in a recitation from a textbook: “The man walked to market with his sow [...] The girl cut turf in the rain [...]”. One student then raises her hand and asks, “How do you cut turf?”, to which JJ responds with a deadpan expression: “With misery and despair, I’d say.” Leaving the classroom, JJ then bumps into another teacher and expresses the need for new Irish textbooks, to which the other sighs and emphasises: “They are the new textbooks.” Serving as a point of identification for the film’s audience in his newly acquired access to the institutionalised process of language transmission, JJ’s lackluster pedagogical encounter thus at once brings to awareness and problematises the particular language ideology at the heart of Irish-medium education.

Indeed, this scene is particularly important in that the significance of its language ideological negotiation extends beyond northern Ireland to the Republic, in which the same “reliance” (MacKenzie, Engman and McGurk 2023: 493) and “overemphasis” (Moriarty and Pietikäinen 2011: 371) on the education system has been credited across the island with the restriction and re-stigmatisation of the Irish language to ‘classroom use’. Reflecting a well-intentioned history of institutionalised language use, whether through the official policy of a post-independence government (Crowley 2005: 166) or a grassroots campaign for minority-language recognition (Ó Baoill 2007), this downscaling of Irish from the public domain is presented in this scene as equally enfolded into the process of language instruction itself, exposing the counterproductive effects of such preservational language ideology through the employment of incongruity humour (Meyer 2000: 313). Clearly verbalised in the student’s question, the disconnect between contemporary life and the traditional heritage embodied in the vocabulary being taught is exaggerated visually through the close-up tracking shot of the students’ uninspired faces and the dramatic aesthetic shift away from the movement and colour of the film’s undeniably urban establishing sequence. Epitomised in the bitterly punchline-like revelation that these “are the new textbooks”, so the institutionalised ideology of Gaelic cultural nationalism (Crowley 2005: 166) is exposed as laughably absurd in its anachronicity, ultimately bringing to both diegetic and metadiegetic awareness its positionality within an essentialist and symbolifying concept of Irishness: “Preservation is a kind of embalming; even as it purports to be an extension of life, it cannot elide its funerary function” (McMahon 2012: 32).

Kneecap is certainly not the first popular media to use humour to criticise the methods and informing ideologies of Irish language teaching, with Irish-American comedian Des Bishop’s short documentary series *In the name of the Fada* providing a key example of a popular cultural product effecting notable changes in both public language ideology and official language planning (see Moriarty and Pietikäinen 2011: 370-73). Though writing in different terms, Moriarty and Pietikäinen note how the series makes particular use of incongruity humour to facilitate language ideological awareness and clarification: “The juxtaposition of his experience of learning the language as a tool for everyday conversation evidenced through the [series] against the experience of the majority of Irish language learners brings these [educational] issues to the fore” (2011: 371). By incorporating similar critical humour into their biopic, *Kneecap* arguably take this one step further, succeeding not only in upscaling the Irish language into the medium of cinema, but in upscaling language ideological clarification itself, using the playfully hybrid form of the semi-fictionalised biopic to incorporate typically documentarian structures of educational dialogue into popular narrative cinema.

With this radical concept of narrative language ideological clarification in mind, JJ's dryly humorous response to the student ("With misery and despair, I'd say") represents a significant step within Kroskrity's process, in which JJ's position as an outsider to the pedagogical linguistic encounter (much like Des Bishop's own diasporic identity) grants him a heightened level of objectivity from which he can voice both humour and criticism more freely. Feeling less of a need to reassert his authority than a permanent teacher would, JJ instead chooses to step outside of the pedagogical hierarchy by responding with a subversive play on grammar which works along the lines of both relief and identification humour to express his empathy for the students' boredom and alienation. Bringing the students thus "to a more equal relationship" with himself (Meyer 2000: 318), JJ momentarily disrupts the didactic structure and process and gestures instead towards a more dialogic approach to language instruction, in which the political and generational positionalities informing the embodied ideology of the curriculum can be brought to awareness through a more equal and open classroom environment. Expressing his own new ideological awareness, JJ's humorous response can thus be positioned as a preliminary example of Kroskrity's "intervention in the name of language ideological clarification", which "would attempt to create intergenerational dialog[ue]s that would promote a greater awareness of the ideologies involved and the unintended consequences associated with the [preservational] practices of elder purism [...]" (2009: 75).

In this light, JJ's ambivalence to the political activism encountered in the following scenes compounds the affective disconnection between the Irish-speaking (or -learning) individual and established structures of language renewal, and as such the strongly felt need for a new language ideology. Following JJ as he proceeds with his day, a sequence of tracking shots cinematically effects this searching impulse, in which the character's turning away from the news broadcast appearance of then-Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams and unnoticed walk past the Falls Road mural of Bobby Sands ('Poet, Gaeilgeoir, Revolutionary, IRA Volunteer') serve to establish an alienating ideological linguascape inextricably rooted in the region's recent violent past. Arriving, then, at an activist meeting held by his partner, Caitlin (Fionnuala Flaherty), JJ's distant and awkward self-positioning at the back of the room re-emphasises his discomfort with the ideological discourses around him, exemplified in the moment of Caitlin's emphatic paraphrasing of historic revolutionary leader and language revival pioneer Pádraig Pearse - "A country without a language is only half a country" - where JJ's hesitant applause clearly distinguishes him from the noisily enthusiastic crowd. While bringing to audience awareness the political struggle for language rights constituting the context of Kneecap's formation, the various revival efforts and informing nationalist language ideologies brought into encounter through the character of JJ are thus equally positioned as not wholly effective, as his initial unimpressed reaction to the Irish textbooks, reflected and amplified through that of the students, remains unchanged throughout this sequence of ideological encounters. Clarified, then, in JJ's later encounter with Mo Chara and his playful, colloquial language use is that which he has been searching for - an everyday use of Irish that is personal, modern, urban and fun.

Emphasised in its affective and narrative significance through the notebook's almost symbolic centrality in JJ's next scene, prompting the character's first depicted moment of joy, this encounter's pivotal nature is ultimately solidified in JJ's proposal to Mo Chara and Móglaí Bap, wherein his attempt to persuade them to make music with him exemplifies the process and significance of language ideological clarification. Telling the boys, "Your lyrics, they're great. I've never read anything like

them in Irish”, JJ attempts to communicate his own affective response to their creative language use, implicitly recognising his own positionality within more institutionalised and intellectualised sites of language use and thus opening a dialogue across implied boundaries of class and age. As Móglaí Bap goes on to argue, “People barely listen to Irish hip-hop, let alone Irish hip-hop in Irish”, JJ’s response of “How do you know when there is no hip-hop in Irish?” places emphasis on the self-procluding, tautological logic of Móglaí’s dismissal in order to ‘recognise the problem’ (Kroskrity 2009: 80) of a lack of popular language use and move it into the boys’ discursive consciousness. As such, he brings to their awareness an understanding of their creative linguistic practice as a meaningful act of language renewal, emphatically responding to Móglaí’s interestingly self-excluding claim that “No cunt who speaks Irish listens to hip-hop” with the plea to “Give them a reason to!” Ultimately asked, “Why?”, JJ exemplifies his own ideological clarification: “Why? Because Irish, it’s like the last dodo. Stuck behind glass in some zoo. ‘Look, but don’t touch’. Someone needs to smash that glass and set the dodo free so it can live.” In this passionate moment, JJ brings together his awareness- raising and positionality-shifting encounters into a creative analogy of preservational language ideology, through which he at once clarifies the problem of linguistic disconnect and disinterest, its ideological basis in traditional, institutionalised language use, and the solution of an ideological and practical shift towards Irish as a living language.

It is in Móglaí Bap’s response, however, where this clarification is truly enacted: “What the fuck’s a dodo?” In line with Meyer’s notion of clarification humour, in which “[h]umorous lines often serve to express one’s views creatively and memorably because they are presented incongruously or unexpectedly” (2000: 319), this diegetically serious moment prompts a laughter response from the audience due to its dialogic incongruity. However, in occupying an unclear, hybrid space between sarcasm and sincerity, the humour is ambivalent in its target, granting viewers a sense of superiority over either the over-intellectualising JJ or the unknowing Móglaí - or, indeed, both. The power of this hierarchy-challenging extradiegetic humour is that it ultimately works to clarify for the audience the same ideological position either way: the very need for de-intellectualising, de-symbolifying, and forward-looking language use which JJ had been trying to express. As such, this pivotal scene of intra-community dialogue is a prime example of language ideological clarification, made all the more effective by its incorporation into a forward-driving and affectively engaging cinematic narrative through which the viewers become emotionally invested in the meaningful nature of the band and their biopic as a revitalising force for the Irish language.

Declarations and Acknowledgement:

The research informing this paper is funded by the Research Ireland 2025 Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

References

- Crowley, Tony. 2005. *Wars of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland 1537-2004* (Oxford University Press).
- Curtin, Ellen. 2026. 'Generation Gaeilge: New Research Reveals Powerful Surge in Irish Among Young Adults', *Gaelchultúr* (n.d., March) <<https://www.gaelchultur.com/en/blog/generation-gaeilge-surge-in-irish-among-young-adults>> [accessed 7 March 2026].
- Dunlevy, Deirdre A. 2023. 'Learning Irish amid controversy: how the Irish Language Act debate has impacted learners of Irish in Belfast', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 44.10, pp. 997-1012.
- Fox, Matt. 2025. 'An Cailín Ciúin: 'A breakthrough moment' for Irish language films', *BBC News NI* (30 October) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-63286110>> [accessed 18 November 2025].
- Kroskrity, Paul. 2009. 'Language Renewal as Sites of Language Ideological Struggle: The Need for 'Ideological Clarification'', in *Indigenous Language Revitalisation: Encouragement, Guidance and Lessons Learned*, ed. by Jon Reyhner and Louise Lockard (Northern Arizona University), pp. 71-83.
- MacKenzie, Alison, Mel Engman, and Orla McGurk. 2022. 'Overt and symbolic linguistic violence: plantation ideology and language reclamation in Northern Ireland', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27.4, pp. 489-501.
- McMahon, Melanie. 2012. 'Irish as Symptom: Language, Ideology and Praxis in the Post/Colony' (unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College London) <<https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/>> [accessed 7 March 2026].
- Meyer, John C. 2000. 'Humour as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humour in Communication', *Communication Theory*, 10.3, pp. 310-31.
- Moriarty, Máiréad and Sari Pietikäinen. 2011. 'Micro-level language-planning and grass-root initiatives: a case study of Irish language comedy and Inari Sámi rap', *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 12.3, pp. 363-79.
- Naxhielly, Aída. 2022. '(Re)Learning the languages that make us who we are. Films and native languages', *Linguapax Review* 10, pp. 39-46.
- Ó Baoill, Dónall P. 2007. 'Origins of Irish-medium Education: The Dynamic Core of Language Revitalisation in Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 10.4, pp. 410-27.
- O'Neill, Jonathan. 2016. 'A Nod is as Good as a Wink: Humour, Postcolonialism and the Case of Irish', *American Journal of Irish Studies*, 13, pp. 67-78.
- Osborne, Eva. 2025. '"Kneecap effect' boosts Irish language popularity but teaching methods are outdated', *Breaking News.ie* (11 February) <<https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/kneecap-effect-boosts-irish-language-popularity-but-teaching-methods-are-outdated-1728554.html>> [accessed 4 November 2025].

Filmography

- An Cailín Ciúin*, dir. by Colm Bairéad (Ireland, 2022).
- In the name of the Fada* (RTÉ, 2008).
- Kneecap*, dir. by Rich Peppiatt (Ireland, 2024).

