

Maynooth Alumni
Magazine 2015

*Best in
the World!*

The BRIDGE

Best in the World

Maynooth University Chamber Choir hoists Pavarotti Trophy to win "Choir of the World" competition

Riding the Wave

Maynooth University and Aquamarine Power

Changing the World Through Innovation

Maynooth wins major social entrepreneurship competition

Plus

New Eolas Building
YouTube and Shakespeare
Maynooth Going Global

Maynooth University Professor awarded prestigious ERC grant worth €1.8million

Prof David Stifter, Maynooth University
Department of Early Irish (Sean-Ghaeilge)

Professor David Stifter of Maynooth University earlier this year was awarded €1.8 million in funding by the European Research Council (ERC) for a project that will date a large number of 7th–10th Century Irish texts and develop innovative methodologies for dating languages that will be applicable across the world, shedding new light on medieval literature, history, and culture.

The highly prestigious award is viewed as the gold standard for research funding in Europe. Prof Stifter is one of an elite group of recipients in the Social Sciences and Humanities Consolidator grant category this year and one of only two in Ireland. In total, 516 applicants from 29 different countries competed for the funding.

Professor Stifter, Head of Maynooth University Department of Early Irish and Director of the MA Medieval Irish Studies, will lead a team of five researchers on the project known as the Chronologicon Hibernicum – A Probabilistic Chronological Framework for Dating Early Irish Language Developments and Literature. “ChronHib” will develop and use innovative methodologies and sophisticated software to perform linguistic analysis on a large body of early medieval texts. By looking for subtle changes in the language over the centuries and by applying advanced statistical methods, Prof Stifter will be able to profile language variations in texts of that period. The major result will be a ChronHib database, which will serve as the key reference point for the linguistic dating of Irish texts and will then provide a model for other old languages in Europe and beyond.

Currently, Prof Stifter is in the earliest stages of the project, having started to put together an international team comprised of colleagues from Austria (Dr. Bernhard Bauer), China (Dr. Fangzhe Qiu) and the US (Dr. Elliott Lash).

Prof Stifter said ultimately, researchers around the world will be able to use the new dating methods in a way similar to how tree-rings serve as chronological indicators in archaeology.

“Linguistic dating is about to take a huge leap forward into the technological possibilities of the 21st Century. By developing and utilising unique methodologies that help us to accurately date these fascinating medieval texts and create linguistic profiles of their language, we are linking the past with the present. Given the complexity of Old Irish, the success of this project will represent a new model for the study of other languages that researchers all over the world will want to emulate,” Prof Stifter said.

An Austrian by nationality, Prof Stifter’s fascination with Celtic languages and Maynooth University’s unique reputation internationally in the field of Irish linguistics drew him to Ireland. Professor Stifter recalls:

“Studying in Vienna, there was an adage in my department, ‘If Maynooth speaks, it is time to listen,’ so when the opportunity arose to come to Maynooth, I jumped at it.”

Maynooth University President, Prof Philip Nolan, recognised the importance of the award, said: “This award continues the long tradition of excellent research at the Department of Early Irish at Maynooth University, and I have no doubt that Professor Stifter’s work will significantly advance our understanding of some of the world’s early languages and cultures.”