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IS WELSH AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE?

Introduction

Visiting Wales, travellers can see bilingual signs and notices. These signs are one of the ways of manifesting that Welsh is one of the official languages of this country. Of all the Celtic languages, Welsh enjoys the largest number of speakers. However, the number of speakers – 582,368 reported in the 2001 Census – makes linguists consider Welsh a language threatened with extinction. For instance, in the *UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages* (Salminen 1993-1999), Welsh is classified as an endangered language. Salminen (1993-1999) points out that “many children learn the language, and recent reports indicate that the state of Welsh is slowly getting better, but it is too early to say if this will stop the gradual erosion of the language area”. Jenkins (2001: 59) even claims that “Welsh is in the process of irretrievable decline”, and that “cold facts [...] point to language death”. The aim of this paper is not only to present the “cold facts”,² but also to discuss a variety of factors which may help Welsh to survive.

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² Cf. Skrzypiec (2009).

1. The facts: Results of censuses and surveys

Jenkins (2001) analyzes a portion of the history of the Welsh language, beginning with the 1901 Census which showed that almost one million people (more than 50 per cent of the population of Wales) could speak Welsh and that 30 percent of Welsh speakers were monolingual. Jenkins (2001: 60) comments on these results as follows, “Welsh was robust in the domains of the hearth, neighbourhood, religion, popular culture, literature and even politics”. By the end of the 20th century (1991), the number of Welsh speakers had gradually decreased to amount to 508,098 (cf. Lewis (ed.) 2009). The “cold fact” is the decline of the number of Welsh speakers from 54.4 to 18.7 per cent of the population.

Jenkins enumerates several factors which contributed to this “story of striking numerical decline”, including, among others, wars, social changes, migration, language policy, mass media and economy.

Jenkin’s paper had been written before the results of the 2001 Census were published. The results clearly show that the number of Welsh speakers began to grow. In the 2001 Census, 582,400 people declared that they could speak Welsh (Jones 2003, n.d.). A comparison of the results of this census and two previous censuses is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Welsh speakers: 1981, 1991 and 2001 Censuses (based on Jones 2003)

Census	Number of speakers	Percent	Change
1981	503,532	19	point of reference
1991	508,098	18.7	- 0.3 percentage points
2001	582,368	20.8	+ 2.8 percentage points

The figures presented in Table 1 show an increase of the group of Welsh-speaking inhabitants of Wales. As Evas (n.d.) comments, “This is the first time that the percentage of Welsh speakers has increased since the first question about language was posed in 1891”.

Table 2 presents Welsh speakers by age and gender (the data coming from the 2001 Census).

The largest group are children aged 5-15; and almost in all age groups, the number of female speakers is bigger than the number of male speakers. The growing number of young Welsh speakers is a factor which allows us to formulate a tentative prognostic that Welsh is not threatened with extinction, at least in the nearest future. Not only did the number of the children aged 5-15

Table 2. Welsh speakers by age and gender, the 2001 Census (Jones 2003)

Age	Percent			Number		
	All	Males	Females	All	Males	Females
3-4	18.8	17.5	20.1	13,239	6,336	6,903
5-15	40.8	38.0	43.8	171,168	81,870	89,298
16-19	27.6	24.0	31.3	40,548	17,672	22,876
20-44	15.5	14.7	16.3	146,227	67,818	78,409
45-64	15.6	15.4	15.8	112,742	54,789	57,953
65-74	18.1	18.2	17.9	47,692	22,483	25,209
75 and over	21.1	20.7	21.3	50,752	18,192	32,560
Total	20.8	19.9	21.6	582,368	269,160	313,208

increase. Jones (2003) observes that “for the first time, the percentage of Welsh speakers in the 25-44 age group increased, from 14.5% in 1991 to 15.1% in 2001.” However, it should be borne in mind that the number of people (aged 3 and over) living in Wales and having no knowledge of Welsh amounted to 2,007,984 (71.6%).

It is worth noting that not all Welsh speakers have a white ethnic background; over 5,500 Welsh speakers declared a different ethnic background (see Table 3).

Table 3. Ethnicity of non-white Welsh speakers (based on Jones 2003)

Ethnicity	Number of speakers	Percent
Asian or British Asian	1648	30
Chinese or other ethnic group	535	10
Black or Black British	443	8
Mixed	2910	52
Total	5536	100

Generally speaking, it can be seen that it is the young speakers, aged 3-24, whose number has recently risen, and that there is an interest in Welsh observed in non-white speakers. The figures presented in the tables above allow us to draw two conclusions. First, the educational, language and publishing policies have proved effective. Making Welsh a living language, which included the acceptance of certain simplifying reductionist tendencies (see Skrzypiec 2005), teaching Welsh at school and publishing books for children in Welsh have all contributed to the recent increase of the number of young speakers.

Apart from speaking, other skills – like understanding spoken Welsh, reading and writing – were taken into consideration in the statistics discussed by Jones (2003). Table 4 presents the mastery of these skills.

Table 4. Skills in Welsh (based on Jones 2003)

Skills	Number of speakers	Percent
Understanding spoken Welsh	661,526	23.6
Reading Welsh	567,152	20.2
Writing Welsh	495,519	17.7
Speaking, reading and writing Welsh	457,946	16.3
Understanding spoken Welsh <i>only</i>	138,416	4.9
At least one skill in Welsh	797,717	28.4

The results of the *2004 Welsh Language Use Survey* (2006) are even more optimistic than those of the 2001 Census. On the Welsh Language Board's internet site, it is possible to find the following selection of the main results of the survey (*2004 Welsh Language Use Survey: The Report* 2006):

- 21.7 per cent of inhabitants of Wales could speak Welsh (20.8 per cent in the 2001 Census)
- 57 per cent of Welsh speakers thought they were fluent
- 62 per cent of Welsh speakers (including 88 per cent of fluent speakers) spoke Welsh every day
- 58 per cent of fluent speakers used Welsh in their most recent conversations

It should be borne in mind that Welsh is also spoken in Argentina: Lewis (ed.) (2009) reports that 25,000 Welsh speakers inhabit the Chubut territory in Patagonia³.

³ For a brief history of the Welsh settlement in Argentina, see, *inter alia*, Brooks and Lublin (2007) as well as R. B. Williams (2000 [1965]). For more information on the Welsh language used in Patagonia, see, *inter alia*, Birt (2005). Brooks and Lublin (2007) concentrate on the influence of the Eisteddfod – “arguably the most important Welsh festival devoted to poetry, literature and music” (p. 247) – on the preservation of the Welsh language and culture in Patagonia.

2. Factors which may positively influence the future of the Welsh language

It is tempting to suggest that the future of the Welsh language depends on the following factors:

- national identity and solidarity
- language policy, including education (with Welsh as the language of instruction)
- language planning
- the promotion of bilingualism
- publications in Welsh (especially books for children)
- media broadcasting in Welsh
- the academic study of the language, history, literature and culture of Wales
- the popularization of academic research
- the attractiveness of the Welsh language and culture

It should be borne in mind that the Welsh identity does not always correlate with the knowledge of the Welsh language: numerous Welsh people do not happen to speak Welsh; it is English that is their native tongue. Welsh must compete not only with Standard English, but mainly with the Welsh variety of English⁴. A Welsh person may simply emphasize his or her identity speaking English with a strong Welsh accent (which is frequently the case). Here we can recall the varieties of English used in Ireland, India, Cameroon and many other countries where English has become nativized, acquiring a number of features not shared with the standard variety of British English⁵. These new features help to build a wall between the past and the present: the new English is not the English of the British Empire anymore, but the language of the people using it “here and now”. What is more, the new variety enables its users to communicate with other people who happen not to be native speakers of British English. The nativized varieties of English are frequently deliberately used even if speakers have Standard British English at their disposal, which testifies to the fact that these varieties have also become exponents of national and ethnic identity.

⁴ For a description of Welsh English, see, *inter alia*, Thomas (1984).

⁵ See Kirkpatrick (2007). For a description of Hiberno-English, see, *inter alia*, Cisło (2001, 2002, 2003), Filppula (1999) and Stalmaszczyk (2005, 2007). It is also worth noting here that Ó Riain (2002) writes about the revival of the Irish language.

Interestingly enough, one may sometimes have the impression that in Wales the more educated the speaker is, the stronger the Welsh accent he or she uses. At conferences held in Wales⁶, numerous Welsh scholars tend to present their lectures in English employing Welsh intonation and pronunciation of certain sounds (e.g. /r/).

The Welsh identity is manifested not only by the use of the Welsh language or the English language with a strong Welsh accent. The other kinds of identity manifestation include various forms, from emblems (e.g. the omnipresent Welsh dragon) to the expression of pride on sharing the Welsh nationality with famous people (e.g. the actor Richard Burton and the poet Dylan Thomas).

As regards language policy and language planning, Wales has well-established institutions which can take vital decisions, supporting and promoting the Welsh language. According to C. Williams (2005: 106), the most authoritative institutions include, among others, the National Assembly for Wales, the Welsh Language Board, the Welsh Development Agency and the Wales Tourist Board. As Lewis (ed.) (2009) reports, “525 Welsh primary and secondary schools provide Welsh-medium education to over 82,000 children (1999)”. In his proposals concerning the future of Welsh, C. Williams (2005: 109f.) stresses the need to link language policy with other policies, enumerating among the priorities the following ones:

- “economic development and job-creation programmes, a priority to tackle the fragmentation of Welsh-speaking communities”
- “holistic language planning which ties language goals to other socio-economic currents and regional development initiatives”

Welsh should then be the language at workplace, and should be associated with the wealth of the country. In education, apart from the Welsh for Adults national plan, Williams calls for “a national strategic plan for bilingual skills [...] which will bring bilingual education into mainstream provision”. He makes another interesting point: bi- and trilingualism should be promoted “to make Wales an ‘intelligent region’”. Another group of priorities relates to what has here been called “attractiveness of the Welsh language and culture”. Williams presents the following priorities: “develop a national language plan for young people and youth culture” and “promote IT developments which offer bilingual choice”.

Making a language attractive is one of the most difficult goals to achieve. Associating the Welsh language with modern technology as well as with what

⁶ For more information about conferences in Wales, see, *inter alia*, two reports by Stanulewicz and Skrzypiec (2007a, 2007b).

young people consider fashionable are good paths to follow. However, fashion does not seem predictable, and it may turn out that, for instance, songs with English lyrics are considered trendier than the same songs with Welsh lyrics. Besides, attractiveness is connected not only with “youth culture” but also with job prospects mentioned earlier. If finding a good job depends, *inter alia*, on the knowledge of Welsh, young people are provided with additional motivation to learn this language.

What has brought positive results is the publishing policy. Marion Löffler of the University of Wales in Aberystwyth (p.c.) claims that the increase of the number of Welsh-speaking children is also due to the publication of attractive books. On Welsh national television children can watch a number of programmes designed for them. Again, the key is attractiveness. Welsh books and programmes are capable of competing successfully with their English counterparts.

As far as academia is concerned, the number of projects, conferences, publications, etc. allows one to take an optimistic view. One of the famous academic centres is the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2005⁷. The Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies was founded in 1985. Its first Director was Professor R. Geraint Gruffydd, and this position is now occupied by Professor Geraint H. Jenkins. The mission of the Centre is studying the history, language and literature of Wales and the other Celtic countries. The Staff are engaged in the following projects:

- Editions of Medieval Welsh Poetry
- A Social History of the Welsh Language
- The Visual Culture of Wales
- The Celtic Languages and Cultural Identity
- Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales

The Centre is also engaged in the editing process of the comprehensive four-volume historical dictionary of the Welsh language, *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (1921-2005).

This academic research is by no means “blue sky research”. The involvement in these projects contributes to the “conservation” and re-discovery of the rich old national culture. The publications containing medieval poetry or dealing with the visual culture of Wales can be read by the general public.

⁷ The information about the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies and the Milestones Conference comes from the Milestones Conference Programme. See Stanulewicz and Skrzypiec (2007b).

It has been demonstrated that the factors mentioned above cannot be treated separately; what is more, many of them overlap and complement one another, forming a network.

Conclusions

The future of Welsh seems both pessimistic and optimistic. The growing number of speakers, the institutions and laws protecting the language, appropriate educational and cultural policies, Welsh-speaking media, extensive and intensive academic research, for the common feeling of national identity and solidarity should all guarantee that Welsh will remain a living language. It should be borne in mind, however, that languages spoken by relatively small communities are – in the contemporary world – threatened with extinction. Suffice it to recall the statistics provided by Crystal (1987: 284) and Majewicz (1989: 16ff.): more than 90 per cent of the people inhabiting our planet use 100 languages, and a very small percentage of the population are users of several thousand languages (probably as many as 5,900); only 138 languages enjoy more than one million speakers. These figures clearly indicate that all the languages not belonging to the privileged group of 100 (or 138) languages are seriously threatened with extinction. Linguistic communities with a lesser used language are – or will soon be – forced to strive for survival in the world where McLuhan's vision of the global village has come true. However, in the contemporary world, two tendencies can be observed: the tendency to globalize and the tendency to oppose globalization. The latter includes, *inter alia*, the revival of national and ethnic languages and cultures, which can be observed in the growing interest in languages like Manx, another Celtic tongue, with recent attempts aimed at its revitalization on the Isle of Man (Draskau 2005, Gawne 2005, Stowell 2005).

Let us return to the 2001 Census statistics: the number of Welsh speakers amounts to 582,368, which constitutes only 20.8 percent of the population of Wales. Even if we take other language skills into account, 2,007,984 (71.6%) inhabitants of Wales (aged 3 and over) have no knowledge of Welsh, which is one of the “cold facts”.

Providing an answer to the question whether Welsh will survive or die is not easy. The rising number of young speakers is undoubtedly an argument in favour of the positive answer. With the appropriate language policy, comprising not only education, and the continuing feeling of national identity, Welsh

has a chance to survive. However, the vital factor is the transmission of the language in the family. In the Preface to *Rebuilding the Celtic Languages: Reversing Language Shift in the Celtic Countries*, Fishman (2005: 11f.) expresses the following opinion: "I consider intergenerational mother-tongue transmission to be the core and the bedrock of security for threatened languages, while fancy footwork and computerized theatrics are marginal." If Welsh is then to survive, the feeling of national identity should be strongly associated with the language and its transmission within the family.

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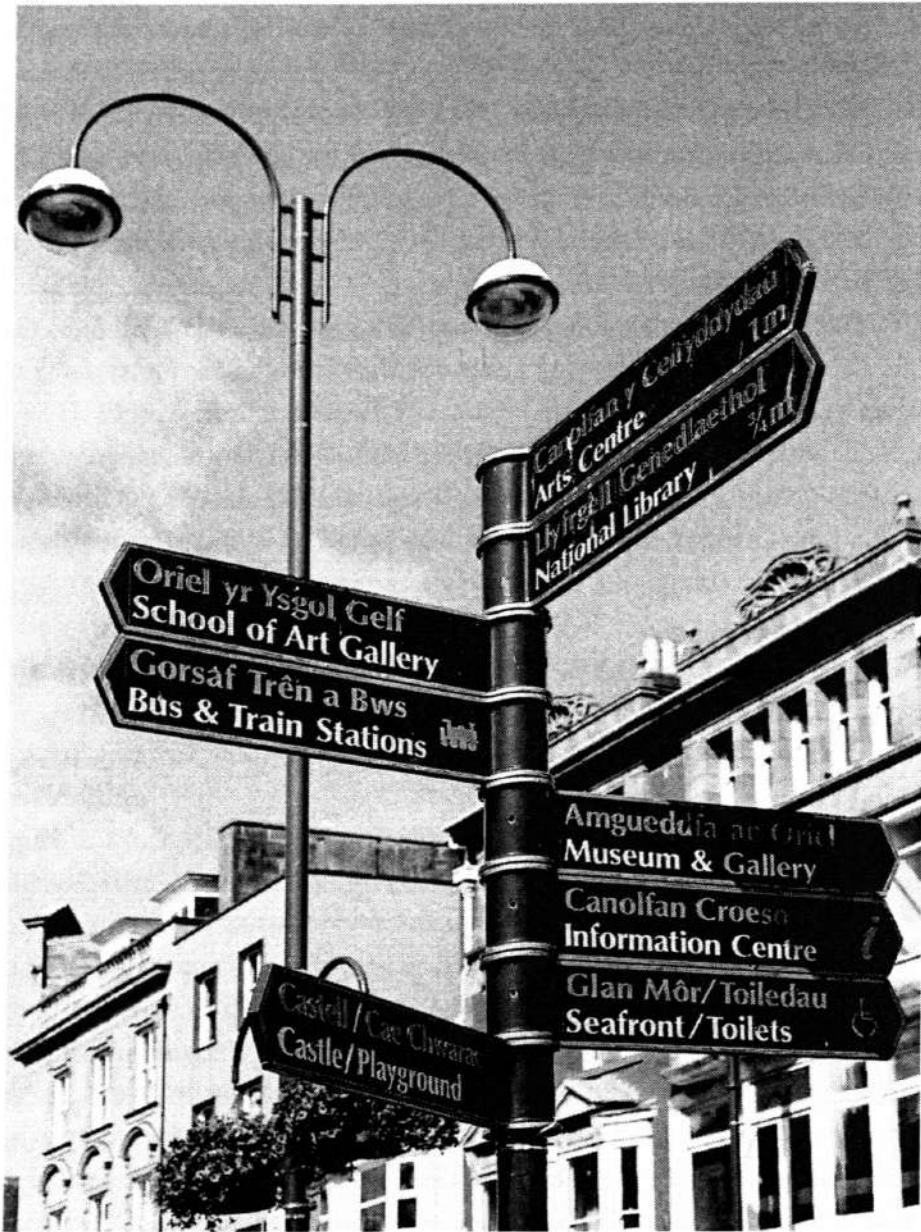
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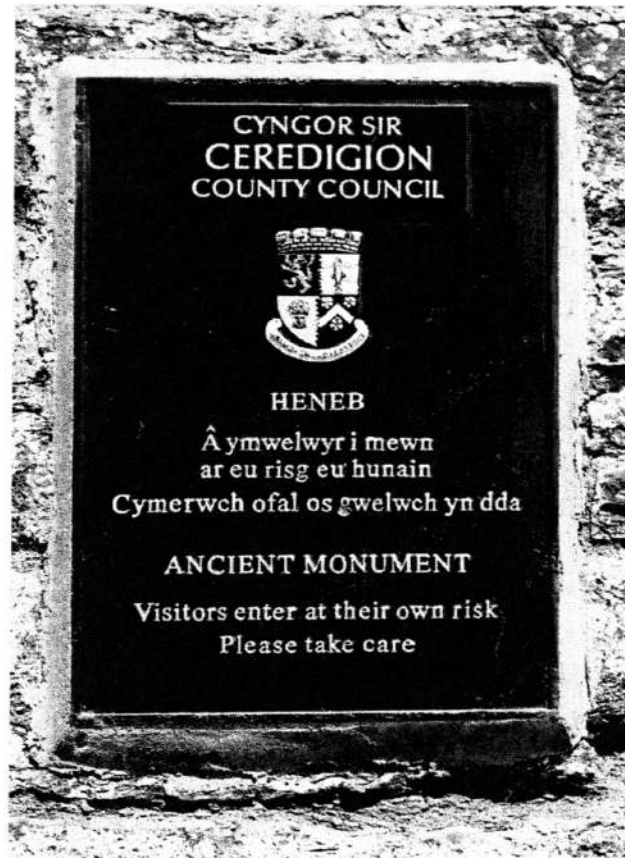
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ABSTRACT

One of the aims of this paper is to discuss the present situation of the Welsh language, including the number of speakers by age and their language skills. The paper also concentrates on the factors which may positively influence the future of the Welsh language. These factors include, *inter alia*, national identity and solidarity, language policy (including education – with Welsh as the language of instruction), language planning, the promotion of bilingualism, publications in Welsh (especially books for children), media broadcasting in Welsh, academic study of the language, history, literature and culture of Wales as well as the popularization of the academic research, and finally, the attractiveness of the Welsh language and culture.



Bilingual signs, Aberystwyth.
Photo: Danuta Stanulewicz



A bilingual notice, ruins of the castle, Aberystwyth.
Photo: Danuta Stanulewicz



Books in Welsh for children, Siop y Pethe, Aberystwyth.
Photo: Danuta Stanulewicz