Standardness and the Welsh language

Elen Robert

Cardiff University, Wales, UK

INTRODUCTION

The 20th century saw significant changes both in the numbers and proportions of Welsh speakers in the population of Wales, as well as in the functional distribution of Welsh. These changes provide the context in which the story of the standardisation (or not) of Welsh since the mid-20th century needs to be understood. Before the 20th century, Welsh had not been used in state administration after the Act of Union of 1536 stipulated that English was to be the only language used by the courts in Wales, and that nobody who made use of Welsh was to possess any public office within crown territories (J. Davies 2007: 213). However, Welsh was used in religious institutions after Elizabeth I ordered the publication of a Welsh version of the Bible. The model used for the translation was the strict pan-Wales code developed in the bardic schools of the Middle Ages (G. E. Lewis 1987), and thereafter it was the religious mode that provided a model for Welsh in literature and poetry, journalism and education. It can be assumed that a large proportion of the Welsh population became familiar with this model. There are two reasons for this assumption: firstly, the translation of the Bible had a profound effect on Welsh society, comparable to the influence of Luther's Bible on German society (J. Davies 2007: 221). Secondly, by the second half of the eighteenth century the majority of the population of Wales was literate, a rarity in Europe. The widespread teaching of Welsh literacy had been achieved through privately-funded schooling that had a religious and a social advancement agenda (*ibid.*: 280).

However, the 20th century saw a dramatic decline in the numbers and proportions of Welsh speakers in Wales. More significantly, there was also a shift in the functional distribution of Welsh. The Nonconformist chapels, through which literacy and knowledge of the literary standard had previously been acquired, were losing their authority and appeal (Morgan 2000). Furthermore, the 1870 Education Act ensured that English would become the official language of the British state education system (C. H. Williams 2000: 642), although some provisions were later made for the teaching of Welsh within state-funded schools (Evans 2000). The Welsh-speaking population largely switched from being taught literacy in Welsh to being taught literacy in English. On the other hand, during the second half of the century an intensified feeling that the Welsh language was under threat, most notably expressed by S. Lewis (1962), led to a revitalisation effort. This effort concentrated on the provision of Welsh-medium education, as well as the expansion of the use of Welsh to other state domains. Increasing numbers of pupils received Welsh-medium education, including many who had not acquired Welsh at home. In 1965, there were 142 pupils in designated bilingual schools. By 1990, this figure had risen to 11,519 (Evans 2000: 353). In addition, the 1993 Welsh Language Act required public bodies to offer services to the public in both English and Welsh, as far as that was reasonably practicable.

THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE RELIGIOUS STANDARD?

These developments have led to some debate and disagreement concerning the existence of a Welsh standard language. This debate has focused largely on spoken Welsh. For example, writing in the 1960s, C. Thomas claimed that Welsh had 'a standard spoken language accept-

able to all Welsh speakers, whether they be illiterate, whether educated, a language which is familiar to all Welsh speakers and used by them if they are actively competent in it' (1967: 242, my translation). Elsewhere Thomas identifies this standard as the religious medium – 'The Welsh of the pulpit has been the standard of spoken Welsh to ordinary Welshmen' (1982: 102).

In both texts these examples have been taken from, Thomas is defending the literary/religious medium, arguing against an attempt to forge a new spoken standard, under the label *Cymraeg Byw* ('Living Welsh'). *Cymraeg Byw* was an initiative in the 1960s and early 1970s, funded by the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC), which aimed to provide guidelines for teaching Welsh. There is some debate regarding whether *Cymraeg Byw* was intended as a model for both second-language and first-language teaching, and whether it was intended as a model for spoken as well as for written Welsh (C. Davies 1988). However, Davies clearly presents evidence that *Cymraeg Byw* was part of a broader effort to close the gap between spoken Welsh and the literary standard, which was felt to be archaic and conservative, and too far removed from spoken practices to serve as a model for second-language learning.

The authors of Cymraeg Byw claimed to be targeting the '"pure", but often conservative and archaic constructions' of 'book Welsh' (Welsh Joint Education Committee 1970: 4, my translation), which suggests a concern with syntax and morphology. The longest section by far is devoted to verb forms. There are also recommendations on other grammatical forms, such as the use of adjectives (whether plural and feminine forms should be used) and prepositions (setting out how each one should be conjugated). However, Cymraeg Byw also recommends on the pronunciation of a very small set of morphemes, where precedence is given to local/regional practices.

The *Cymraeg Byw* initiative is interesting since it shows that ideas about standardness were changing. There seemed to be a schism between those who still adhered to the more traditional norms of the literary and religious standard (such as C. Thomas, who vociferously opposed *Cymraeg Byw*) and those who felt that the literary standard was too conservative, and wasn't a 'living' form of Welsh. This was indicative of a shift in authority on standardness, from institutions that had previously authorised literary/religious Welsh (notably the Nonconformist chapels) to the (pre-university) education sector, which eventually replaced the chapels as the principal agent through which Welsh literacy was taught.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to measure the effect of *Cymraeg Byw*. C. Davies (1988) claims that it continued to be used in teaching, albeit modified slightly, particularly through the incorporation of regional characteristics, depending on the broad location in which it was taught (north or south Wales). But it is unclear today to what extent *Cymraeg Byw* is still used as a model in the teaching of Welsh, second-language or first-language, spoken or written, and to what extent the forms it recommended have come to be seen as any more than an educational model, and a controversial one at that. Nevertheless, *Cymraeg Byw* was the first attempt by an emergent Welsh-medium education sector to forge a model for teaching that did not take the religious medium as its authority.

Welsh-medium education is inevitably having some standardising effect on Welsh. As Sayers notes, 'If education is the main reason for increasing Welsh use, then the kind of Welsh being used is more likely to be influenced by that education' (2009: 293). There is evidence to that effect, although we must conceive of 'standard' somewhat differently than the sense assumed in the preceding discussion. 'Standard' was conceived of as a form of language that is (in theory) seen to be correct, and which is, in C. Thomas' conception, acceptable to all speakers of the language. A different conception of 'standard' is as a vernacular form used by speakers, having come to replace regional dialects in all their functions. 'Standardisation', in this alternative view, is one of the explanations that Jones (1998) postulates

for the 'dialect death' that she found evidence of in the two communities she studied in Wales.

Jones interviewed a number of Welsh speakers of different ages in two communities, one in south-east Wales (Rhymney) and the other in north-east Wales (Rhosllannerchrugog). She analysed their casual speech, taking significant differences between age groups in each locality as evidence of language change. Most interesting for this discussion is that in Rhosllannerchrugog she found differences within school-age first-language Welsh speakers, according to whether they attended a Welsh-medium or an English-medium school. In relation to some (although not all) region-specific features, first-language Welsh speakers who attended English-medium schools showed results more similar to the older age groups than did their counterparts in Welsh-medium education. Jones infers that those who attended English-medium schools were retaining dialect features which their counterparts in Welsh-medium education were losing in favour of standard features. These results suggest that Welsh-medium education may be having a standardising effect on those who receive it.

In the same locations, Jones also conducted a matched guise experiment, where respondents were asked to judge pre-recorded examples of speakers reading near identical texts – one in the local dialect and one in what Jones calls 'Standard Oral/Northern Welsh'[1]. Respondents were asked which of the two guises presented they would be more likely to employ as a teacher, a nursing home assistant and a presenter on the Welsh-language television channel, S4C. In both locations 'standard' guises were chosen more frequently over dialect for teacher and S4C presenter. This suggests that 'standard' is associated with education as well as the Welsh-language broadcast media.

The association of a particular way of speaking with S4C presenters suggests that the language used on S4C is fairly uniform. However, S4C's written language guidelines (S4C, 2008) suggest otherwise. The guidelines highlight a problem for S4C in having to broadcast to a linguistically diverse audience (in terms of practice and attitude). The guidelines aren't draconian, asking producers to consider the nature of the programme in deciding on the appropriate language. Yet they do allude to notions of 'correct', 'standard' and 'rich' language, although these concepts are not well-defined. What is striking is that 'correct' and 'standard' don't necessarily mean 'uniform' for S4C. It doesn't seem therefore, that S4C is advocating a particular variety of Welsh as 'standard', at least not through written policy.

On the other hand, it is clear from the guidelines that what does count as 'correct', 'standard' or 'rich' language can be defined in some way – it is a matter of language purity. For example, in attaining a 'high standard of correctness', presenters are expected to 'avoid needless literal translations of English expressions' (§1.7, my translation). The S4C guidelines also have a relatively long section dedicated to the use of English words and clauses in programming, asking programme makers to regulate the use of English words to ensure that the language used is 'in keeping with the standard appropriate for the programme' (§2.5, my translation). This is a matter of language contact, which I will turn to next.

LANGUAGE CONTACT AND LEXICAL PLANNING

The long-standing presence of English in Wales has inevitably had an influence on the language practices of Welsh speakers. This is particularly evident on the lexical level. A. R. Thomas (1987) identifies the use of loanwords and the calquing of English phrasal verbs as the major lexical characteristics that distinguish 'colloquial' from 'standard' usage, which he also labels 'casual' and 'formal'. He claims that there are a number of 'doublets (…) in which

---

[1] Unfortunately, Jones doesn't define what she means by 'Standard Oral Welsh' or 'Standard Northern Welsh' (used in the south Wales and north Wales experiments respectively), nor does she describe the linguistic differences between the guises.

a loan and an indigenous word occur respectively in casual and formal contexts' (107). These 'doublets' include, for example standard/formal *cerddoriaeth* ('music') and colloquial/casual *miwsig*. Similarly, he presents *diffodd* ('to extinguish') and *rhoi allan* (a calque of the English phrasal verb 'to put out') as formal and casual variants. He ascribes this differentiation only to the language practices of 'educated' speakers of Welsh, claiming that a number of other Welsh speakers are 'style-attenuated' 'with no need of access to a standard variety' (*ibid.*). Consequently, they are only competent in casual/colloquial speech, and possess only the (English) casual/colloquial variants of English/Welsh lexical 'doublets'.

Thomas' claims are speculative. However, Jilg (2003) presents some evidence of variation in lexical competence that supports Thomas' claims. Jilg studied the lexical competence of Welsh speakers in Blaenau Ffestiniog, a town in north-west Wales. He compared competence across the two most salient social networks that he'd identified in the town: 'Pobl y Dafarn' ('the people of the pub') and 'Pobl y Pethau' ('the 'pethau' people')[2]. Using visual stimuli, Jilg elicited lexical items for a number of concepts (e.g. relating to machines, household items, job titles, etc.). He found that 'Pobl y Pethau' were more likely to respond with Welsh forms (rather than English) than were 'Pobl y Dafarn'. One of the extralinguistic differences he found between his groupings was that 'Pobl y Pethau' tended to have attained a higher level of education than 'Pobl y Dafarn'. This supports Thomas' claims that more educated speakers are more likely to posses Welsh words for certain concepts. Nonetheless, the study doesn't shed light on how lexical resources are deployed.

This finding also raises questions about lexical competence and social class. 'The essence of standardization lies in the relationship between the status of any particular form as a reflection of the speakers of that form and its prestige or value for social mobility. Thus any debate about language purity is inevitably a debate about class' (G. Williams 1987: 96). In as far as the use of more extensive borrowing is a reflection of 'Pobl y Dafarn' and the use of more 'Welsh' forms is a reflection of 'Pobl y Pethau', we need to ask whether there is a class difference between these groups. Unfortunately, Jilg doesn't make class a salient aspect of his interpretation. Theorising class and social mobility in Blaenau Ffestiniog, and amongst Welsh speakers more generally, is beyond the scope of this chapter. But it is a question that needs to be asked, in particular in light of recent efforts to elaborate the Welsh lexicon.

Lexical elaboration is one of the major efforts currently underway in forging a standard Welsh. It occurs under the label 'terminology planning' or 'standardising terms', and is a clear instance of language planning. It involves the codification of carefully selected lexical forms, ultimately in order to 'facilitate' the functional redistribution of Welsh. Current efforts began in earnest in the 1950s, and involved projects to compile bilingual English-Welsh glossaries in particular subject areas, such as music, history, mathematics and physics. These glossaries were designed for use in the compilation and use of teaching materials. Terminology planning has increased dramatically since the 1993 Welsh Language Act, and since then much of the work has been carried out ostensibly to facilitate the provision of Welsh-language services by the state. More recent thematic glossaries have included those in the fields of finance (e.g. Prys 2000a) and health (e.g. Prys 2000b). Many of the fields covered straddle, but are not restricted to, the public sector.

These efforts are coupled by (or perhaps feed into) a more popular awareness of a need to coin Welsh terms. For example, a well-known DJ on Radio Cymru (the BBC national Welsh-language radio station), Hywel Gwynfryn, invites listeners to phone in to his show with suggestions for 'Welsh' words where none exist. There is an on-line dictionary of Welsh swear-words, *Y Rhegiadur* (www.rhegiadur.com), which invites readers to contribute their own innovative ways of articulating profanities in Welsh. There is also a lively mailing list called

---

[2] 'Y pethau' is a culturally-specific term, literally meaning 'the things' but referring fairly obliquely to cultural institutions and activities, such as the Eisteddfod, drama and poetry.

'WELSH-TERMAU-CYMRAEG', a forum for people to discuss how they would express certain concepts in Welsh.

Planning initiatives are seen to be filling a lexical gap, a gap which has developed as a result of the historical exclusion of Welsh from certain domains, such as science and business, and in particular from state institutions. As Prys notes '[minority] languages usually have very poor terminological resources. If they are not used for affairs of the state they will not easily develop the necessary vocabulary to deal with these matters, and may be excluded from domains such as public and private administration, science and technology, business and industry' (2006: 41). Terminology planners seek to fill this gap, making minority languages *usable* in affairs of the state, and in so doing play a role in securing language rights.

There is a need to theorise the lexical standardisation endeavour, and to ask whether there is a real need to develop a common, uniform 'Welsh' lexicon, or whether such an endeavour is actually driven by a language ideology that sees borrowings as illegitimate. Far from 'developing a form of Welsh which is popular, useful and used' (Welsh Langauge Board 2005: 36), terminology planning could be seen as responding to and reproducing an ideology that creates restrictions on linguistic expression, and which stigmatises the language practices of those who show evidence of borrowing. This seems paradoxical in the case of minority languages, since efforts to promote and facilitate their use (including standardisation) are framed as counter-hegemonic and as means of empowering the powerless. For example, Prys (2007) certainly sees her work as a democratic endeavour. She presents the approach taken to terminology planning by herself and her colleagues as 'consensus-based', and positions herself against linguists and lexicographers who 'take it upon themselves to prescribe to the public what is acceptable and unacceptable use of language' (2007: 118).

It does seem that borrowings and contact phenomena more generally are frowned upon by those who concern themselves with language standards. As a piece of anecdotal evidence, Williams (1999: 42) defines the language used in a particular Welsh text as *standard* partly because it is free from English words. Another example, this time regarding syntactic influence from English, is seen in P. W. Thomas' introductory section to his Welsh grammar (P. W. Thomas 1996), where he tries to rationalise how he has decided what to include as 'Welsh' and what not to include. He explains that, according to the rules of Welsh, an uninflected preposition must be followed by a noun-phrase. Consequently, the following is ungrammatical (1996: 7):

ble chi'n dod o?
where you PARTICLE come from
['where do you come from?']

What he doesn't note, however, is that the sentence isn't meaningless. It isn't the case that it cannot be interpreted. And the interpretation is the same whether the uninflected preposition 'o' is placed at the end of the sentence (as in the example) or at the beginning of the sentence, as Thomas would prefer ('o ble chi'n dod?'). After further discussion he revealingly states that in an endangered language situation it is crucial in defining correctness to separate those language features that follow 'teithi'r iaith' ('the characteristics of Welsh') from those which are a result of interference from the majority language. He concludes that influence from English (an effect of language contact) is the most likely explanation for the placement of the preposition in the example. Therefore, 'ble chi'n dod o?' isn't ungrammatical because it is meaningless; it is ungrammatical because it ostensibly follows patterns of English grammar. It doesn't follow an assumed 'natural development' of Welsh, but shows unnatural corruption resulting from contact with English. There is an implied criticism that the speaker is unable to keep both languages separate, and it is suggestive of a blending of languages, which Thomas considers undesirable.

This seems to be the most prevalent aspect of standard language ideology in relation to Welsh. The apparent threat posed by English pervades Thomas' introduction. He warns that 'the monolingual Welsh speaker is nothing but a memory (…) And no matter how persuasive the arguments in favour of bilingualism, the harsh truth is that the influence of English is seeping deeper into the essence of the Welsh language' (*ibid*.: 11, my translation). In its most intense articulations, such as this, Welsh standard language ideology is fervently monolingual and protectionist. And despite the difficulties of locating any particular form of standard Welsh, as I outlined above, the issue of contact phenomena seems to be one where there is little disagreement amongst those who concern themselves with language standards.

CONCLUSIONS

The 20th century saw significant changes in the institutions that authorise models of Welsh as standard. These changes were the result of social and political developments, as well as of efforts to revitalise Welsh. This led to a contestation of the model which was previously held as standard Welsh, and to a number of efforts to standardise Welsh anew. These efforts have focused primarily on syntax, morphology and lexis. Despite these efforts, it is unclear whether there is a consensus around how to define standard Welsh, or if a clear standard exists at all. There is some evidence that language practices are becoming more uniform towards a 'standard' variety, based on educational and media models. However, the evidence is too insubstantial to draw any strong conclusions, and it is uncertain to what extent the media are actively driving any change.

Moreover, the social changes and revitalisation efforts have created their own contexts for language use, where language practices and ideologies are inevitably evolving. There is evidence of structural change away from traditional or standard models of Welsh. P.W. Thomas' comments, above, might be seen as reacting to these changes, which he interprets as the unnatural and threatening influence of English. There does seem to be agreement within certain circles that ideal Welsh is pure Welsh, where 'Welsh' is often constructed in opposition to English. Nonetheless, it isn't clear to what extent the meanings attached to 'English' by current planners and others who seek to make their voices heard are shared by other Welsh speakers. For example, we need to question whether these meanings are class-related, and consequently whether lexical planning serves the interests of a particular class. It is also unclear whether these meanings will continue to be prevalent, in particular since there has been increased bilingualism in Wales in recent years, as well as a dramatic increase in the production of Welsh by those who do not learn Welsh as a first language. These Welsh speakers must have a different orientation to the languages they speak, in particular to English (or Englishes) as the language of their homes and families.

REFERENCES

Davies, C. 1988. Cymraeg Byw. In M. J. Ball (ed.) *The Use of Welsh: A Contribution to Sociolinguistics*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. 200–210.

Davies, J. 2007. *Hanes Cymru*. London: Penguin.

Evans, W. G. 2000. Y Wladwriaeth Brydeinig ac Addysg Gymraeg 1914–1991. In G. E. Jenkins & M. A. Williams (eds.) *'Eu Hiaith a Gadwant'? Y Gymraeg yn yr Ugeinfed Ganrif*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 331–356.

Jilg, T. 2003. *Cadarnle'r Gymraeg? Astudiaeth Eirfaol o'r Iaith Gymraeg ym Mlaenau Ffestiniog*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Cardiff University.

Jones, M. C. 1998. *Language Obsolescence and Revitalization: Linguistic change in two sociolinguistically contrasting Welsh communities*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Lewis, G. E. 1987. Attitude to the Planned Development of Welsh. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 66: 11–26.

Lewis, S. 1962. Tynged yr Iaith, *Annual radio lecture, 13 February 1962*: BBC Wales.

Morgan, D. D. 2000. Yr Iaith Gymraeg a Chrefydd. In G. E. Jenkins & M. A. Williams (eds.) *'Eu Hiaith a Gadwant'? Y Gymraeg yn yr Ugeinfed Ganrif*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 357–380.

Prys, D. 2000a. Termau Cyllid y Cynulliad / Dictionary of Finance Terms for the National Assembly of Wales. Cardiff: Welsh Language Board.

Prys, D. 2000b. Termau Hybu Iechyd / Terms for Health Promotion. Bangor: University of Wales, Bangor.

Prys, D. 2006. Setting the Standards: Ten Years of Welsh Terminology Work. In P. Ten Hacken (ed.) *Terminology, Computing and Translation*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag. 41–55.

Prys, D. 2007. *Terminology Policies in Wales.* Paper presented at the Minority Languages and Terminology Policies, 27–28 July 2007, Dublin.

S4C. 2008. Canllawiau Iaith.

Sayers, D. 2009. *Reversing Babel: Declining linguistic diversity and the flawed attempts to protect it.* Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Essex.

Thomas, A. R. 1987. A Spoken Standard for Welsh: Description and Pedagogy. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 66: 99–113.

Thomas, C. H. 1967. Review of *Cymraeg Byw, Rhifyn 2.* Welsh Joint Education Committee, 1967. *Llên Cymru* 13: 242–249.

Thomas, C. H. 1982. Registers in Welsh. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*: 35: 87–115.

Thomas, P. W. 1996. *Gramadeg y Gymraeg*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Welsh Joint Education Committee. 1970. *Cymraeg Byw* Vol. 3. Cardiff: Welsh Joint Education Committee.

Welsh Langauge Board. 2005. The Future of Welsh: A Strategic Plan.

Williams, C. 1999. Cymraeg Clir. Bangor: Gwynedd Council, Welsh Language Board, Canolfan Bedwyr.

Williams, C. H. 2000. Adfer yr Iaith. In G. E. Jenkins & M. A. Williams (eds.) *'Eu Hiaith a Gadwant'? Y Gymraeg yn yr Ugeinfed Ganrif*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 641–665.

Williams, G. 1987. Bilingualism, class dialect, and social reproduction. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 66: 85–98.