

Essay Two – Introduction to Celtic Languages (HPCS4002)

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What is known about the death of languages such as Manx and Cornish and why, in your view, has the Welsh language survived and been continuously spoken by native speakers?

Language is a constant yet subtly changing form of expression, shifting dialectically across time and place. Occasionally those changes to speech are not just one of dialect, but of replacement, when an entirely new form or family of languages enters the country. If the incoming language becomes the dominant voice, the vernacular retreats to the periphery. When the last native speaker dies, taking their language with them, it too is considered dead, finally eliminated after a gradual process. Using three Celtic languages of the British Isles as a basis, the circumstances that surround language death are considered in this essay. Manx and Cornish both serve as examples of languages that have died and more recently been revived. The Welsh language, which survived a retreat and is now making a comeback, will provide the means to determining aids to language preservation and demonstrate how vulnerable that process is to political manipulation. It is posited that socio-economic struggles and political pressures are key factors in language death, deeming forced erosion of language and subsequent diminishment of national or local spirit and identity to be a tool of the coloniser. Population shift, via emigration and immigration, is another cause for concern, especially areas of low populations or those with less land mass. It is proposed that an investment in language survival ensures that vital diversity, national pride, and local knowledge remains intact, and that it is wise to consider the implication of the loss of language on economic and social well-being. As evidenced in Wales, it is often an endeavour to maintain those threads of heritage and identity, woven so deeply into a language, that impact its renewed take-up or being sustained bilingually, with technological availability or advantages showing to be a component in the halt of language retreat and facilitation of language reach.

The Isle of Man, Cornwall and Wales, all situated on the western side of the British Isles, and Scotland in the north, maintained their individual Celtic languages long after Roman and Anglo-Saxon invasions exposed them to potential language loss during the development and establishment of English elsewhere. The expected pattern of spread of an invading language, from an epicentral point of impact outwards, is demonstrated by the Celtic periphery. Whilst language shift in England itself is not being discussed here, it was this initial English wave that was successfully held back for some time by Manx, Cornish and Welsh, but one they have all been continually susceptible to. Any language frontier is a potential seam of cross-over, loanwords and bilingualism, but whether that becomes a 'moving frontier' depends on other factors.¹ Once in motion the wave of language change tends to play out in a 'three-

¹ Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction Of The World's Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 136.

generational pattern' of native monolingualism, to bilingualism, to non-native monolingualism. Whilst bilingualism may actually last far longer than one generation and the resultant shift much slower, the process is the same:

Monolingual communities on the edge become first bilingual and then monolingual in the invading language; their neighbors to the west then acquire bilingualism from them, then their neighbors in turn, and so on. The result is a slow but implacable cultural wave, moving steadily west over the decades, lasting longer than any one life span, and in which each generation plays only a small part.²

Whilst countering an incoming language presented challenges of physical proximity to Wales and Cornwall, the waves of the surrounding Irish Sea acting as tiny buffer against the tide of English for the Isle of Man. However, the state and momentum of each of their language frontiers is linked to and affected by other individual elements, some of which have been direct non-benign contributors to the current outcome.

For more than 1000 years Manx, or Manx Gaelic, had been spoken on the Isle of Man before the first English administrative influences began in the 1400s, coinciding with decreased contact with other Gaelic speaking peoples.³ In the 1600s English-medium schools were established on the island and further education overseas in England was promoted. Although not enforced, the use of English was encouraged under the guise of spiritual wellbeing gained from better access to Biblical scriptures.⁴ This situation with the Anglican Church remained fairly passive until the death of Bishop Hildesley, who had been supportive of Manx church schools and Manx translations, upon which provision was withdrawn. By the end of the 1700s the temporarily slowed retreat of the language had ended: English was the dominant language of tutelage across the island; plans to abolish Manx were uttered in religious quarters; and certainly, as far as the church was concerned, the days of publishing hymns and scriptures in the vernacular were numbered.⁵ During this time the number of English speakers rose in the growing towns, with overseas traders and English immigrants becoming more common. The 1765 Isle of Man Purchase Act, or The Revestment Act, led to greater poverty on the island and a subsequent native migration to the Americas. A bishop's lie to a printing company in 1822, stating that 'the teaching of Manx Gaelic had been prohibited by an Act of Westminster' when no such thing had occurred, halted the further printing of Manx materials.⁶ Then as tourism began to take off, the influx of 250,000 visitors that came each year by the end of the 1800s, effected an extremely high economic and social pressure to speak English.⁷ During this time, although some children still learned Manx as their mother tongue before learning English at school, once there they were discouraged, even punished for using it, cementing the rapid advance of the English 'frontier'.⁸

² Ibid.

³ George Broderick, *Language Death In The Isle Of Man: An Investigation Into The Decline And Extinction Of Manx Gaelic As A Community Language In The Isle Of Man* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999) p. 13.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 15-16.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 17-19.

⁶ Ibid. p. 18.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 23-25.

⁸ Ibid. p. 22.

It is percentage of population rather than the total number of speakers that is a better gauge of language success and stability, but, on a small island, linguistic population percentages can shift very quickly through emigration and immigration. Manx speaker numbers continued to ebb, with the last twelve thousand disappearing in one hundred years, until Ned Mandrell remained as the last native-born speaker.⁹ When he died, in 1974, the language went with him, but, having left recordings of interviews, and a few non-native adult speakers he had taught, as part of his legacy, it could be said that the language did not completely die.¹⁰ The diligent work of linguists with some of the last speakers ensured the possibility for renewal regardless of whether they perfectly fitted the NORM or not:

Sociolinguistics has also shown the tendency of men to be more conservative, or less innovative, in their speech than women and so the ideal informant for classical sociolinguistic and dialectological studies, as well as the choice informant for oral literature and folklore collectors has thus been what Chambers and Trudgill described as the NORM, the Non-mobile Older Rural Male.¹¹

Whilst it is undergoing a revival, children are not being born into the Manx language at home yet, although in theory that could happen, thereby fulfilling once more the criteria for a living language. Albeit a hopeful situation, it is a precarious one, as highlighted by the 2001 census which showed that only '2.2% of the population are able to speak, read or write the language' and the 2016 census reveal that just under half the population of the Isle of Man are native born.^{12 13}

The fate of Cornish is somewhat similar to Manx in that it has been revived, but their stories are different. Cornwall was 'incorporated into Wessex by AD 802', and later English leadership ousted the Cornish chiefs.^{14 15} The English language's slow creep advance of approximately ten to twenty kilometres every hundred years, began not long after. In the 1600s the rate of language loss sped up considerably, leaving only 5,000 speakers by 1700.¹⁶ ¹⁷ The regulation of the tin trade and heavy taxes by Henry VII and the failed working-class uprisings of the late 1400s eroded the national identity further.¹⁸ A number of factors continued to adversely affect the survivability of Cornish:

⁹ Brian Stowell, 'Provision Of Manx Language Tuition In Schools In The Isle Of Man', in *New Directions In Celtic Studies* ed. by Amy Hale and Philip Payton (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), pp. 141-151 (p. 141).

¹⁰ Ibid. p.141.

¹¹ Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin, 'Sociolinguistic Vitality Of Manx', *International Journal Of The Sociology Of Language*, 231 (2015), 45–62 (pp. 50-51).

¹² Breesha Maddrell, 'Speaking From The Shadows: Sophia Morrison And The Manx Cultural Revival', *Folklore*, 113. 2 (2002), pp. 215-236 (p. 218).

¹³ Isle of Man Government, *2016 Isle of Man Census Report* <<https://www.gov.im/media/1355784/2016-isle-of-man-census-report.pdf>> [accessed 4th January 2022]

¹⁴ Nettle and Romaine, *Vanishing Voices*, p. 139.

¹⁵ Zsuzsanna Renkó-Michelsén, 'Language Death And Revival: Cornish As A Minority Language In UK', *Eesti ja Soome - Ugri Keeleteaduse Ajakiri*, 4. 2, (2013), 179-197 (p. 182).

¹⁶ Nettle and Romaine, *Vanishing Voices*, p. 133.

¹⁷ Ken George, 'Cornish', in *The Celtic Languages*, 2nd edn., ed. by Martin J. Ball and Nicole Müller (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 488–535.

¹⁸ Mark Stoye, 'The Dissidence Of Despair: Rebellion And Identity in Early Modern Cornwall', *Journal Of British Studies*, 38. 4 (1999), 423-444 (pp. 434-435).

Its decline may be attributed to several historical events, among them the Wars of the Roses, during which many old Cornish families disappeared, the discovery of America (many Cornish people travelled West) and the An Gof Rebellion of 1497, the renaissance of learning (which spread English into Cornwall), the Reformation – which that the age-old intercourse between Cornwall and Brittany (Breizh) ceased to function within the framework of a common church, and the English Civil Wars.¹⁹

During the Reformation, the introduction of the Book of Common Prayer in English and the enforcement of other religious prohibitions generated concern at the retreat of the language, the socioeconomic imbalance rose, and another unsuccessful rebellion followed.²⁰ By the 1700s Cornish was deemed the language of the ‘poor and the illiterate’, the language of fisherwomen and shipmen, by the majority.²¹ The native tongue supposedly vanished in Penzance upon the death of Dolly Pentreath in 1777, the last documented speaker of Cornish.²²

Offa’s Dyke might have been constructed to delineate the physical border of Wales in the late 700s, but Welsh was spoken in England’s Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, and Shropshire for a further thousand years.²³ The English agenda was made clear though in the 1400s:

The penal laws of Henry IV, in force in Wales through the fifteenth century, specifically denigrated Welsh speakers and debarred them from economic or social progress. The laws included the following provisions: In the border areas, Welshmen were forbidden to acquire lands; if stolen goods from a border town were not recovered in one week, residents could retaliate against any Welshman they could seize; Welshmen were prohibited from acquiring lands within boroughs, nor could they hold any municipal offices; Welshmen were forbidden from the carrying of arms, the fortification of any house, or the holding of responsible office in the service of any English lord; Welshmen were denied freedom of assembly without special permit. The Act of Union of 1536 specifically prohibited Welsh speakers from holding office, and imposed English judges and the English church. No policy could have been better calculated to undermine the social basis for the transmission of the vernacular language.²⁴

With the English language making its way over the border and into Wales during the next few centuries, a change in the education system in 1846 hastened its advance:

In nineteenth-century schools, pupils who were caught speaking Welsh were forced to wear a wooden badge called the "Welsh Not." The wearer was in turn allowed to transfer the badge to any of his or her peers overheard speaking Welsh, and so it passed from child to child. At the end of the week, whoever had it in his possession

¹⁹ John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 489.

²⁰ Renkó-Michelsén, ‘Language Death And Revival’, p. 182.

²¹ Ibid. p. 182.

²² Nettle and Romaine, *Vanishing Voices*, p. 133.

²³ Keith Ray and Ian Bapty, *Offa’s Dyke: Landscape And Hegemony In Eighth Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), pp. 10-12.

²⁴ Nettle and Romaine, *Vanishing Voices*, p. 139.

was punished by flogging. The practice of the Welsh Not largely disappeared in the 1880s, though in some areas it persisted into the twentieth century.²⁵

Anglesey, Denbigh, Caernarvon, Carmarthen, Cardigan, Montgomery, and Merioneth remained as the Welsh Heartlands, while the shift to English was noticeable in the southeast.

When comparing the survival of Welsh to the death of Manx and Cornish one difference immediately presents itself: the larger population in a land area five times and thirty-six times the size respectively, was probably a factor in staving off the aggressive campaign to erase the language there. In all three places the moribund languages disappeared more quickly in the towns and amongst the upper classes, but sheer numbers in rural Wales might have slowed the rate of decline long enough for some other positive factors to take effect.

The controversial parliamentary 'Act for the Translation of the Scriptures into Welsh' in 1563 initiated an unforeseen effect.²⁶ It gave impetus to the bards, who had kept the language alive during this time, and the scholars, who were now required to translate the Bible, to standardise the language, and to translate and archive a variety of texts not just the Good Book.²⁷ The advent of the printing press turned the tide:

A large number of books were printed in Welsh, not only in the field of religion but also encompassing vocabulary, grammar, linguistics, botany and archaeology. Welsh became established as a written medium and the printed word gave the language prestige and status. The imminent prospect of the extinction of Welsh as the language of culture seemed to concentrate the minds of writers and spur them into action. The proliferation of printing presses on Welsh soil from 1718 onwards led to an extraordinary expansion in book production and other printed material. Between 1660 and 1799 a staggering 2633 books were published in the Welsh language.²⁸

By this time an external interest in Welsh had been a little stimulated by Edward Lhuyd's *Archaeologia Britannica* of 1707, and the work of other historians and antiquarians.²⁹ The Celtic Revival movement which followed in the 1800s raised the profile of Wales' rich literary history, and Welsh survived into the age of radio, television, and internet, its future more certain now via a revised education program, mixed media access, and resurrected bardic festivities. Whilst Cornwall and the Isle of Man have their poets, mythology, and folklore too, neither made it to paper in good time, let alone a wide enough distribution, to have any effect on their disappearing languages.³⁰ This coupled with the lack of availability of religious texts added to the decline:

People did choose English, repeatedly and consistently, but did not themselves generate the conditions under which they had to choose. Clearly, the Celtic territories

²⁵ Nettle and Romaine, *Vanishing Voices*, p. 140.

²⁶ W. Ogwen Williams, 'The Survival Of The Welsh Language After The Union Of England And Wales: The First Phase, 1536-1642', *Welsh History Review*, 2 (1964), 67-93 (p.70).

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 87-91.

²⁸ David Brian Jones, *The Influence Of Religion On The Survival Of The Welsh Language 1801-2011: A Tale Of Two Centuries*. (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Wales, Trinity St David, 2013).

²⁹ John Collis, *The Celts: Origins, Myths & Inventions* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2003), pp. 49-52.

³⁰ Maddrell, 'Speaking From The Shadows', pp. 229-232.

were always going to be attracted to the incidental benefits of the economic takeoff that was going on in the neighboring economy, but had a more equitable political system been in place it is far from obvious that the linguistic decline would have happened. Where significant use of the Celtic languages was allowed to develop in religion and particularly in education, the tide was stemmed. This factor may partly account for the better position of Welsh than its sister languages today.³¹

With all three languages we can see similarities in cause and effect of language loss. The inklings of language shift can be seen in the economic growth that began to occur around 1000 AD alongside 'agricultural productivity, investment in technologies such as water- and windmills, and increasing market participation and economic specialization'.³² As the capitalism emerged there was a move away from agriculture towards industry. On the back of that, the common causes included the depletion of local industry or sanctions on earning potential; increase in tourism; immigration of monoglot non-native speakers; and emigration of vernacular speakers. At each stage these factors lead to both inequalities and opportunities in which people neglect their language in an attempt to escape poverty and gain privilege.³³

The military and religious zeal associated with the English colonisation overseas from the 1500s onward was repeated by some with barely restrained fervour in the campaign to gain political, economic, and educational control of Wales, Cornwall and the Isle of Man, bringing money into urban areas, swelling the pockets of the elite further and making the rural areas more economically reliant.³⁴ In addition, many of the regulations put in place for trade or political purposes brought about a loss of contact with speakers of other Celtic languages in some way. Together these factors sped up the process considerably by making the English language more desirable due to the association with a much improved financial and social status. Not only do young people then grow up seeking to abandon their heritage, but parents, wishing the best for them, are forced to encourage them to do so, creating a rift of shame between generations and within the national identity. It almost goes without saying that the limitations on free speech and the punishments meted out on children in schools and on adults through law enforcement would have wounded the individual and national psyche, leading to bitterness and confusion for many. The harm caused by forced language death, although not akin to the severe damage done by land theft, does share commonalities, such as the subsequent loss of soul, pride, and diversity, and the disappearance of local folklore, plant lore, and ecological knowledge.

In conclusion, as observed in the cases of Manx, Cornish, and Welsh, when under threat by invasive and unsupportive measures people will leave behind a language if it means economic and social survival, especially with a view to the next generation. Likewise, as evidenced by the last few hundred years of Welsh history, and to a certain extent by the mechanisms used to revive Manx and Cornish, when a language is widely available in the

³¹ Nettle and Romaine, *Vanishing Voices*, p. 142.

³² Ibid. p. 132.

³³ Ibid. p. 154.

³⁴ Ibid. pp. 131-132.

most up to date technology; when people are allowed to foster pride in their heritage and spiritual outlooks, and see them externally respected; when the young can see their future reflected in native speaking role models; and when educational and social systems support the continuance and daily use of a language, even in a bilingual society, then that native language's survival is less at risk.

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