

Brief History of the Welsh Language

This essay will talk about the Welsh language, its history, nearest linguistic connections as well as the causes for its survival.

The Welsh language belongs to the group of Brythonic languages, a branch of Celtic languages native to the British Isles which consist of Breton, Cornish and Welsh, Welsh being historically the second language to develop from Brythonic, creating a fertile ground for the Cornish to develop. Brythonic was the first language to be recorded as used in the area of England, Wales and parts of Scotland during the Roman invasion in 43 AD. (learnwelsh.cymru, n.d.)

Welsh has an extensive and well-documented history, that can be traced back hundreds of years. The first signs of Welsh existing as its own language can be dated back as early as the period between 400 and 700 AD (learnwelsh.cymru, n.d.). Welsh was used in an official manner throughout the majority of its existence and can be considered a cornerstone of Welsh identity during the storms faced by the Welshmen.

Welsh grammar is very specific and precise, as is the whole language. The syntax of the language is something common for the insular Celtic languages as it follows the order of verb, followed by the subject, ended with the object, otherwise known as the VSO, contrary to the standard Subject, verb, object system, present in the majority of European languages. Another unique aspect of the Welsh language is the fact that it does not contain indefinite articles, further to this, there is no grey area when it comes to nouns, there's either a feminine or masculine noun, which makes the language similar to the European languages in this aspect, but different to English. Welsh contains many sounds that are unique and not present in other languages like the ll sound made by putting the tongue on the roof of the mouth, behind the front teeth.

The grammar of the language relies heavily on the works of early bards, and early works towards unifying it were based on the description of the pronunciation, rather than the structure of the language. (Morris-Jones, J., 1970). According to Morris-Johns, the earliest recorded examples of Welsh Grammar come from The Red Book of Hergest or Llyfr Coch Hergest as is the Welsh title of the book, which is a collection of Welsh poetry and prose, including stories from The Mabinogion. The dates of the creation of this book are set as the period between 1382-1410, which would classify it as a Medieval Welsh manuscript.

Another important example of the Welsh language being recorded would be the manuscripts of Four Branches of Mabinogi a collection of four manuscripts, each one ending with the words 'thus ends this branch of the Mabinogi'. They are the origin of the term Mabinogion and date as early as the 11th century (Johnson, B., n.d.). The Four Branches of Mabinogi consist of four connected stories of Pwyll, the Prince of Dyfed, Branwen, the mistreated Queen of Ireland, Manawydan, a story about Magic and a tale of a rescue, and a story of Math, Lord of Gwynedd. The Mabinogion, a much larger collection of stories, consists of additional stories about King Arthur and his Knights:

'Five of the remaining stories involve the legend of Arthur and his knights. The setting for Culhwych and Olwen is Arthur's Court and includes a list of his knights. Arthur's Court is again the setting in The Dream of Rhonabwy, which tells of a story involving Arthur and his knights, fairy heroes and Celtic warriors.' (Johnson B, n.d.)

Further to this,

'The other Arthurian stories The Lady of the Fountain, Geraint the Son of Erbin and Peredur the Son of Evrawc, are mainly concerned with the quests and adventures of Arthur's knights. The latter even includes one of the earliest references to the Grail legend.' (Johnson B, n.d.)

The Mabinogi and the connected stories, commonly thought to be written by different authors than the first four was compiled into a collection by Lady Charlotte Guest and the term Mabinogion is largely attributed towards her translation. The Mabinogion was released under the guidance of Lady Charlotte Guest in 1840. She has further influenced the survival of the Welsh language by supporting the Eisteddfod and other Welsh Festivals (Johnson, B., n.d.)

King Henry VIII was one of the leading forces in the fight against the Welsh language and Welsh tradition, direct opposition to the achievements of rebellion led by Glyndwr, who bravely fought against the unification of Wales and England and the force presented by the English Marcher Lords. Henry VIII has found his place in history as the biggest threat to the language that created a chain of events that further damage it. His reformations, which ensured that English replaced Welsh in everyday life were successful in doing so. He has prevented people from using the language in their everyday life, creating a negative impact that if sustained would have led to the eradication of the language. Even though the Church had its faults and was a major contributor to the destruction of local practices, beliefs and culture, it was due to the ever-present Christianity and its important role in the everyday lives of people, that Welsh was able to resurface. Due to the translation of the Bible, later known as William Morgan Bible into Welsh, the language was able to be partially saved and to resurface in the daily lives of people.

This unfortunately was not the only challenge Welsh has faced. The actions of the crown had a ripple effect, reshaping the hearts of people across the country. Before the changes and even before the Glyndwr rebellion Welsh was known as the language of the lower class, the farmers, workers, peasants, whilst the English considered their tongue to be superior in every aspect. The Welsh, fortunately, kept their pride throughout that period and valiantly fought for their rights and beliefs. All of this has changed in the 18th century and allowed for the "Welsh not" to come to the surface. Powered by the beliefs and history of oppression and unsuccessful fight for independence, people began to consider their language, a crucial part of their identity, to be something to be ashamed of. The schools proceeded to limit and nearly eradicate the Welsh language from the premises and would punish, often physically, those that spoke their mother tongue. This practice, fortunately, was not consistent and only present in certain parts of Wales, most likely more affected by the actions of the Crown than others. The practice of Welsh not is recorded to have taken place up until the 20th century in some places, but with time became less frequent and finally disappeared into the pages of history, hopefully, to never return.

It is no wonder then, that during the industrialisation in the 19th century, people started to gravitate towards English,

In the nineteenth century, the Welsh language still did not benefit from the increasing literacy levels amongst the general public. Whilst children were required to attend school, Welsh was not part of the school curriculum. English was still the dominant language as it represented administration and business in an era of imperial expansion. (Brain J., n.d.)

The surplus of Englishmen moving to Wales and working there, caused English to be the most convenient language to be used. Taking into account the attitude that Wales was part of the Kingdom, people coming from England felt entitled to use their language, rather than learning the language spoken in Wales. The Welsh, known for their hard work, being able to speak the English

language found it easier to use it during work, therefore reinforcing the overpowering presence over the language and diminishing the use of Welsh.

It was not until the 20th century and the emergence of the Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Court Act that the situation has begun to change. People finally took definitive steps to rectify the situation in which they found themselves. The language was in poor shape, the number of native speakers continued to decline, whilst rarely anyone learnt Welsh as the second language. The efforts made to introduce learning materials and reintroduce Welsh in schools, even if in a form of additional lessons, were successful. The 20th century brought many changes from the sociolinguistic point of view, the stand that people took and the campaigns they led, made it possible for the state of the language to start improving. Welsh became an official language in the country, the bilingual roadsigns passively introduced the language to those that had no intentions of learning it, improving their awareness, whilst the official forms being available in Welsh ensured that people who wished to cultivate their culture and language, were able to.

The Eisteddfod is another example of the conscious efforts made by different organisations to look after their heritage. The annual competition started gaining more popularity, enticing younger generations to develop their language skills and through creative means share them with others.

These days the situation looks much better. Welsh is available in schools and became compulsory, as should be with the language in any country of the World. People started learning Welsh as their second language and discover its potential in relation to learning about the past. As the language is an integral part of the culture it became necessary to learn it to be able to fully understand it. With the wave of neopaganism and fascination about the Celts, people proceeded to gravitate towards it and wish to learn more, which considering many tools available online, as well as the multitude of courses accessible through different institutions made it possible, regardless of the place or time.

The government has always played a crucial role in the state of any country's culture. It is no different when it comes to Wales. With the creation of the Welsh Government on the 12th of May 1999, many new opportunities were created. By giving power to the Welsh and the ability to, in many ways, govern themselves, people were able to take control of their country. Even though it was not immediate, by 2017 the government created a program to increase the number of Welsh speakers, allowing easier access for those that wish to learn the language.

The Welsh language has an extensive history, through all the struggles that Welsh people had to go through, the language was one thing that has never abandoned them, by ensuring its survival people are capable of tracing back their roots and discovering the rich history surrounding their country. If the language or the understanding of it would disappear, the manuscripts, full of traditions and beliefs, would be nothing more than stationary objects in museums, speaking of times gone and holding secrets hard to discover. It is sad to see people able to learn the language, with all the means at the tip of their fingers, not doing so, but because of that, just as it was the duty of our forefathers to keep the language alive during the turbulent times, so it is ours to keep it alive in a time of peace.

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