

A look at languages



- ▶ Variety of languages
- ▶ Language change
- ▶ Language status
- ▶ Language contact
- ▶ Language shift
- ▶ Language death
- ▶ Language revitalisation

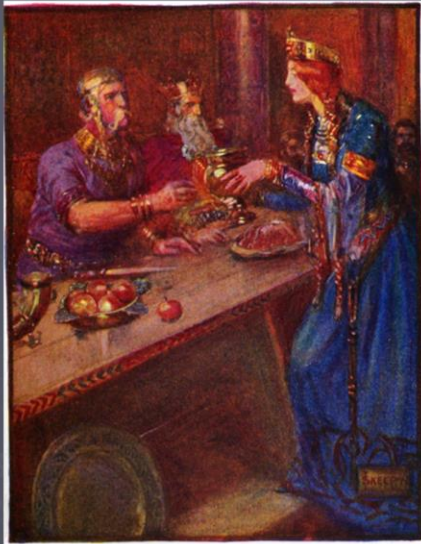
As mentioned in Part 1, a wide variety of different languages is spoken across the world (the exact number will be looked at in greater detail later). Nevertheless, if we were to add up all the speakers of all the world's languages, the total figure would be far higher than the sum of the human population. This is because most people are at least bilingual. Sometimes, this comes as something of a surprise to those of us who live in largely monolingual countries, especially those where English is the dominant language.

Also, the world's languages are not static. They change internally over time, come into contact with other languages, split into more than one variety, or even die out altogether. They therefore have to “compete” for resources in the form of speakers, and the greater the status of a language, the greater its chances of survival.

It's worth remembering at this point that none of us chooses our mother tongue. That choice is made for us by those who transfer (or not) their languages to us when we are children, a task usually undertaken by our parents. Intergenerational transmission is therefore a major factor in the continued health of any language.

We shall start by looking at language change over time, and as this talk is being given in English, for simplicity's sake, our first examples on the next slides will come from that language. Here's a little bit of English for you on the next slide:

Old English



Hwæt! **We** Gardena **in** geardagum,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Oft Scyld Sceng sceapena þreatum,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla
ofteah,
egsode eorlas. Syððan ærest wearð
feasceaft funden, **he** þæs frofre gebad,
weox **under** wolcnum, weorðmyndum
þah,
oðþæt **him** æghwylc þara
ymbsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde, gomban
gyldan. þæt wæs god cyning!

The language in this slide is English. Specifically, it is *Old English* from the Anglo-Saxon period (fifth to eleventh centuries). This label implies some form of continuity to Middle English and Modern English, but as we can see, hardly any of the content is recognisable today. Some words which have survived have been highlighted in bold, but care must sometimes be taken even with these. We can see that pronouns and prepositions are the most likely to have survived. Incidentally, the word *god* in the last sentence does not mean *god* but *good*, with *god cyning* meaning *good king*.

English is in origin a *Germanic* language and during the Anglo-Saxon era would have sounded (and looked) much more like Dutch, German or one of the Scandinavian languages than it does today. The words in the slide comes from the opening lines of *Beowulf*, an epic poem set in the sixth century, but the manuscript dates from several centuries later at around the end of the first millennium of the common era. Below is a translation of the slide content:

LO, praise of the prowess of people-kings of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped, we have heard, and what honor the athelings won! from squadroned foes, from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore, awing the earls. Since erst he lay friendless, a foundling, fate repaid him: for he waxed under welkin, in wealth he throve, till before him the folk, both far and near, who house by the whale-path, heard his mandate, gave him gifts: a good king he!

Image: An illustration from Henrietta Marshall's *Stories of Beowulf* (1908).

Middle English



Whan that Aprille with his shoures
sote
The droghte of Marche hath perced
to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich
licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the
flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete
breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and
heeth

The words in this slide are from the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* which date from about 400 years after *Beowulf*, towards the end of the fourteenth century. They are in Middle English, which lasted from the twelfth century to the end of the fifteenth. Although some of it is a little difficult in parts, we can see that it is much easier to follow than the Old English of *Beowulf*.

The most significant event which took place between the two is the Norman conquest of England, which saw literally thousands of words of French origin (maybe as much as a third of the entire English lexicon) enter the English language. This means that English often has two words for the same thing, one from a Germanic source and another from the French. So for instance, English has the verbs *to begin* (*beginnen* in modern German) and also *to commence* (*commencer* in modern French).

Incidentally, the Normans were not French in origin, but Vikings. *Norman* just means *Northman* or *Norseman*. They were given Normandy by the King of France, basically as a bribe to get rid of them after they laid siege to Paris in the ninth century. A few generations later they had swapped the Norse language for French.

Here is the slide content in modern English: *When that April with his showers sweet, The drought of March has pierced root deep, And bathed each vein with liquor of such power That engendered from it is the flower, When Zephyrus too with his gentle strife, To every field and wood, has brought new life*

Image: Chaucer as a pilgrim from the Ellesmere manuscript

Romance Languages

Distribution of Romance languages in modern Europe:



Descended from spoken (vulgar) Latin:

- ▶ Italian
- ▶ Romanian
- ▶ French
- ▶ Catalan
- ▶ Spanish
- ▶ Portuguese

One of the best recorded historical changes in language is the break-up of *Latin* into the *Romance* languages. The modern languages of Italian, Romanian, French, Catalan, Spanish and Portuguese (as well as some less well-known ones like Sardinian and Occitan) all grew out of the *spoken* (sometimes called *Vulgar* or *Common*) Latin of the Roman Empire. This was rather different to the *Classical* Latin of written texts. Following the collapse of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century, the various dialects of spoken Latin were no longer held together centrally, and so started to separate. Geographical barriers, like the Alps and the Pyrenees, and political barriers, like the formation of new countries and borders, helped this process along, until what had been a series of dialects (called a *dialect continuum*), drifted further apart to become different languages.

The physical gap between Romanian, which is spoken in both Romania and Moldova, and the block of languages in western Europe, can be explained by the later migration of Slavic peoples into the Balkans, which effectively cut off the Romanians from the rest. The basic message here is that once one group of people stops communicating with another, any common language they may have will diverge until they eventually become separate languages. It's also worth adding that the process of linguistic Romanisation had not gone so far on the fringe areas of the Empire, such as Britain, Greece and Turkey, as their indigenous languages outlived the Roman occupation.

Celtic Languages

Pre-Saxon Celtic languages in Britain and Ireland:



The Brittonic group:

- ▶ Welsh
- ▶ Cornish
- ▶ Breton

The Goidelic group:

- ▶ Irish
- ▶ Manx
- ▶ Scottish Gaelic

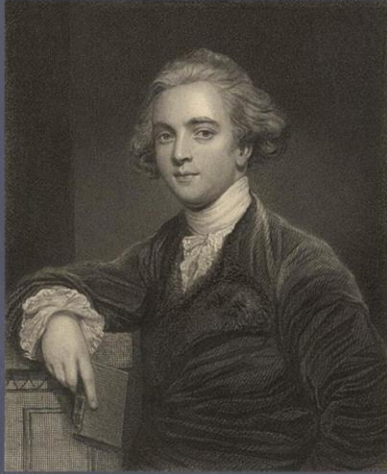
Before their conquest by Rome, Celtic languages had been spoken across *Gaul* (all of France, and parts of Belgium and Switzerland) as well as *Iberia* (Spain and Portugal). They were extinguished there but survived in the British Isles. Prior to the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century, the area shaded red in the slide would have spoken *Brittonic*, i.e., the language of the “Ancient Britons”. The blue area would have spoken *Pictish*, and the green would have spoken *Goidelic*, or simply Gaelic.

The Pictish language did not survive the medieval period, but, as happened with Latin, the Brittonic language, via fragmentation and migration, split into *Welsh*, *Cornish* and *Breton*, while the Goidelic language divided into *Irish*, *Manx* and *Scottish Gaelic*. Although the speakers of these six languages were well aware of their Brittonic and Goidelic “parents”, they were unaware that, at a level further back, Brittonic and Goidelic had themselves shared a common ancestry with each other and also with the Celtic languages of continental Europe. This was convincingly demonstrated to them in 1707 by Edward Lhuyd, a naturalist and linguist born in Shropshire to Welsh parents. He was himself a Welsh-speaker.

Today, all of the surviving Celtic languages are endangered, with Welsh, which is classified as ‘*vulnerable*’, being in the *strongest* position.

Image courtesy of Asarlai

Indo-European Languages



- ▶ Celtic
- ▶ Italic (Latin)
- ▶ Germanic
- ▶ Balto-Slavic
- ▶ Hellenic (Greek)
- ▶ Albanian
- ▶ Armenian
- ▶ Indo-Iranian

The philologist Sir William Jones was also a Welsh-speaker, born in London to a Welsh father of the same name (a mathematician who began the use of the π symbol).

On 2 February 1786, Jones (Jr.) delivered a presentation to the Asiatic Society on the history and culture of the Hindus, where he uttered these, by now famous, words:

“The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists; there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family.”

So, as Edward Lhuys had shown that, for example, Welsh and Irish shared a common “grandparent” via the Celtic branch of languages, William Jones demonstrated that they also shared the same “great-grandparent” with all of the Germanic, Romance, Slavic and Baltic languages, as well as Greek, Albanian, Armenian and many of the languages of Asia as far as India (shown by Persian and Sanskrit in the quote above). This ancestral language would come to be called Proto-Indo-European.

Image: A portrait of William Jones held at the National Library of Wales.

Language Status

The Laws in Wales Act Welsh Language Clause (1536):

"... from henceforth no Person or Persons that use the Welsh Speech or Language shall have or enjoy any Manner Office or Fees within the Realm of England, Wales, or other the King's Dominion, upon Pain of forfeiting the same Offices or Fees, unless he or they use and exercise the English Speech or Language."

An excerpt from "The Blue Books" (1847):

"...his language keeps him under the hatches, being one in which he can neither acquire nor communicate the necessary information. It is a language of old-fashioned agriculture, of theology, and of simple rustic life, while all the world about him is English . . . He is left to live in an under-world of his own, and the march of society goes . . . completely over his head."

The status of a language can have a huge impact on its survival prospects in today's world. For most of history, officialdom made little difference to the lives of everyday people because they played no part in it. However, when states begin to demand more of their citizens, official status has more impact. It can be particularly concerning when speakers of one language are governed by speakers of another.

One of the earliest examples of an imposed "official language" comes from the so-called "language clause" of the Laws in Wales Acts (otherwise known as the "Acts of Union" between England and Wales). This clause basically stated that Welsh-speakers would have to learn English if they wanted to hold any kind of public office. As most of them didn't hold public office, its consequences weren't felt at a time when the vast majority of people in Wales spoke nothing but Welsh.

In the nineteenth century this was *still* the case, but an inquiry held into the state of education in Wales in 1847 by three commissioners (none of whom could speak Welsh) claimed that the Welsh language was holding people back. Some 23 years later, an elementary education was made compulsory for children across Wales and England, however, this education was offered in English only, even to children who had no knowledge of it. By this time, reading and writing were more important, but official documents in Welsh were non-existent, so the lack of official status for Welsh really began to bite over 300 years after the original legislation.

Language Contact and Shift

The logo for the 2021 Welsh census, featuring the text 'cyfrifiad census 2021' in a purple, sans-serif font. The word 'cyfrifiad' is on the first line, 'census' is on the second line, and '2021' is on the third line. The logo is set against a white background within a dark grey rectangular frame.

cyfrifiad
census
2021

A century of decline
in Welsh-speakers:

1891: 54%

1901: 50%

1931: 37%

1961: 26%

1991: 19%

2001: 21%

As well as compulsory education in English, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw inward migration to Wales from other parts of the United Kingdom by people looking for work in the industrialised parts of the country. This resulted in an unprecedented *contact* between the two languages. As English in general had higher status and many more speakers than Welsh, it also led to a language *shift* from Welsh to English as many parents failed to pass the Welsh language on to their children.

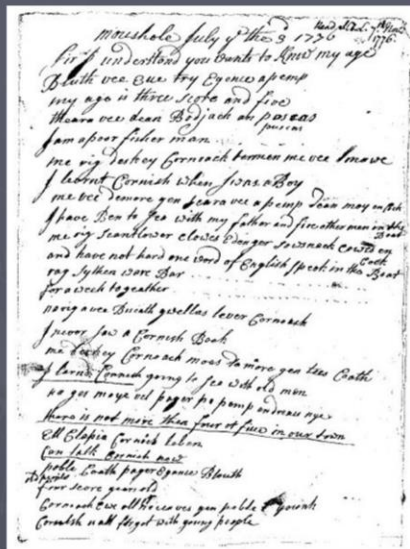
The figures in this slide show the percentage of people who noted that they were able to speak Welsh in the various censuses. In the space of 100 years the proportion of people able to speak Welsh fell from more than one in two, to fewer than one in five.

Recent legislation, as well as campaigning organisations like *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg*, have sought to reverse this decline, and Welsh now has official status in Wales, as can be seen by its inclusion on the 2021 census form above, something which would have been unthinkable in 1921. It should be added that the Welsh language question is only asked to residents of Wales, despite there being about 150,000 Welsh speakers outside of the country.

Similar, but even worse declines, were seen between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries in the other Celtic countries, where Irish and Scottish Gaelic lost ground to English, and Breton lost ground to French. The fate of Manx and Cornish will be shown on the next slide.

Image: The 2021 census logo in Wales.

Language Death



Na ges moye vel
pager po pemp en
dreav nye ell clapia
Cornoack leben, poble
coath pager egance
blouth.

Cornoack ewe oll
neceaves gen poble
younk.

The Cornish language got into difficulties even earlier. With serious decline setting in in the sixteenth century, it retreated gradually westwards until it had nowhere left to go, and by the year 1800 had all but died out. This slide contains a copy of the last letter written in Cornish when it was still, barely, a living community language. It was written bilingually on 3 July 1776 (the day before the American Declaration of Independence) by William Bodinar, a fisherman from Mousehole.

The extract highlighted in the slide notes that there were no more than four or five people in Mousehole who could still speak Cornish, old people 80 years of age, and that the language had all been “forgotten” by the young. People with a knowledge of Welsh will be able to see similarities in words such as *vel* (fel) *moye* (mwy) *pemp* (pump) *dreav* (dref) *pager egance* (pedwar ugain) *blouth* (blwydd) *Cornoack* (Cernyweg) *ewe* (yw) *oll* (holl) and *gen* (gan).

The Manx language fell into decline at much the same time as most Celtic languages, but, as with Cornish, its small number of speakers made it much more fragile. Tourism from the north of England hastened its demise, and although 30% of the population of the island could still speak Manx in 1874, by 1974 its last native speaker had died.

Both Cornish and Manx were declared *extinct* by UNESCO, but the growth of revival movements means that they have recently had their status “improved” to *critically endangered*.

Image: A copy of William Bodinar’s letter.

Language Revitalisation



- ▶ European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992)
- ▶ European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995)
- ▶ UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger

The Celtic languages are far from the only ones under threat of extinction, to such an extent that international bodies such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations have tried to encourage action from member-states to protect them. The Council of Europe is *not* the same thing as the European Union. It is a kind of United Nations of Europe with 47 member states from Iceland to Russia, including 20 not in the EU. The CoE was formed in 1949, and the UK is a founder (and still existing) member.

The top flag in the slide is the European Flag, and dates from 1955. It may be flown by any of the CoE's 47 member states. The EU was also granted this right in 1985.

The CoE (not the EU) has been home to the European Court of Human Rights since 1953, but it has also established treaties related to languages and national minorities, namely the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the European Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The UK has ratified the first of these with respect to five of the Celtic languages, but France has not done so for Breton (or any of its other regional/minority languages such as Basque and Catalan).

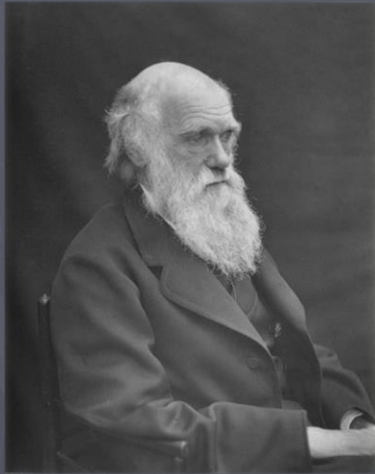
The lower flag is that of UNESCO, a specialised agency of the United Nations. Part of its remit is the promotion of linguistic diversity globally. It produces strategies for their protection and an *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* which has an interactive online version. The categories of endangerment are *vulnerable*, *definitely endangered*, *severely endangered*, *critically endangered* and *extinct*.

[illegible]

In international bodies, the situation varies. The European Union, with 27 member-states, has 24 official languages (not every member-state has its own language, e.g., Belgium). Important documents are translated into all of them, and so the EU is highly multilingual. The United Nations, on the other hand, representing the entire world, has only six, namely Arabic, (Mandarin) Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. Even major languages with hundreds of millions of speakers like Hindi don't make this list. The International Olympic Committee, again representing the entire world, has only two, French and English, while Air Traffic Control uses only English (although sometimes the local language may be used if understood by everyone in particular circumstances). As far as the world's languages are concerned, then, there is a clear "pecking order" in operation.

11

Curious Parallels



"The formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously parallel."

The quote in this slide was made by Charles Darwin in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man*. He noticed a number of striking parallels between languages and biological species. For example, they are both constantly changing gradually over time, and do so in an unplanned manner over which they have little conscious control. The process of formation is much the same for both, with new species or languages coming into existence from ancestors which become extinct. The circumstances which can cause the new to develop from the old are also similar, and include things like being cut off geographically from one another, or changes to the balance of the environment.

When active, they have to compete for limited resources with other species/languages and the arrival of a new "invasive" competitor can force them to have to adapt or die. There are also parallels in the "barriers" between them, namely the language barrier and the species barrier, which help us to identify individual types in the first place.

With both languages and species, identification may not always be obvious, and it can sometimes be difficult to tell the difference between a language and a dialect, or a species and a subspecies. In both cases, the *tree model* is often used to show descent and relationships between them. Finally, with languages and (even more so) with species, there is an enormous diversity of different types, and it is to diversity, in all its manifestations, that we shall turn in Part 3.

Image: Photograph of Charles Darwin