

Assignment 2: What is known about the death of a language such as Manx or Cornish and why in your view has the Welsh language survived and has been continuously spoken by native speakers

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Possibly we may firstly need to ask ourselves, is a language truly dead if there is no spoken dialogue socially. This might seem to be a futile comment, but if we take as a paradigm, Latin, then we are surely looking at an extensive history of use for a long period after the language ceased to be used on a person-to-person basis. This particular language lives on in a number of ways: as the basis for other related languages, as 'loan-word' reservoir, and as a base terminology for science nomenclature such as medicine and botany. Along with French, it forms the foundation for Italian in its conventional form. Although it could be regarded as dead language to all intents and purposes through oral means, it lives on elsewhere as a pillar of civilized literate society. There remains also the role of a ritualistic element within the Catholic religious rite.

Regrettably, in comparison, a Gaelic variant such as Manx could hardly be described as having these advantages, of an international and possibly dictatorial language such as Latin was. So whereas Latin and to a similar extent Greek had an extensive empire-wide coverage in terms of active communication whether via trade or administration, and with a large vocabulary emerging from the Mediterranean multicultural environment, Manx by contrast was a victim of its insularity, subject later to language 'shift' by way of Anglicisation from the north-west and Liverpool areas along with interest as a retirement settlement area and favorable tax regime for the UK mainland. A brief summary of the progress of Manx Gaelic on the island might in fact take the form of a comment in *Britannica's* online encyclopaedia . . .

'Although they succeeded in establishing their language on the Isle of Man, the Gaels lost their hegemony over the island to the Norse in the 9th century and recovered it only from 1266 to 1333, when they lost it again to the English. They were consequently unable to provide, as they did in Ireland and Scotland, the aristocratic support needed by the bardic institution' [1]

We are informed that the last native speaker to any great extent died in 1974 and this says much to explain why the decline was so decisive, for once a language presumably reaches the stage where a handful of participants are using it, in possibly an environment of twentieth century mobility and technological change, then unless a concerted effort was put into force to rapidly build outwards from that meagre pool of speakers there would be little hope of resurrection. In other terms,

an exponential growth by way of offspring adoption of the language or some means of official governmental imposition to maintain a viable and vibrant pool of speakers. As a matter of fact this position may have been predictable for although there had been some considerable efforts to promote the language by the establishment of the Manx Language Society in 1899, at around the same time a census figure of 9% was noted in 1901 returns as a basis for progress in the new century. But, by 1921 this had declined seemingly quite decisively to around 1%, obviously spelling potential doom for any meaningful usage.

With reference to the language experiences in Wales, it could be argued that a similar parallel was taking place in the twentieth century. This is to say that increasing Anglicisation had been one of the results of the rapid development in industrialised society in the nineteenth century. Urbanization had followed on, like a magnet pulling in the working class from the pastoral west and, crucially, east, from beyond the confines of Wales, so that migrant workers gradually and gratefully filled the large numbers of terraced property that sprang up along with the metallurgical industries and coal mining of the south Wales areas associated with these. In fact, it could be said that the area from coastal Newport across and up and down the valley topographies westwards through the Neath, Swansea to Llanelli coastal belt represented a vast potential of industrialized output reliant on migrant labour or their children, whose management and administrative control was English, and of course along with that, an educational system reliant on an almost monoglot English curriculum.

Be this as it may, what is apparent is that along with such incredible industrial transformation that surrounded towns and their environs such as Merthyr Tydfil and Swansea, there lay a compensatory rural environment where the situation had become either bilingual or to a very lesser extent remaining empirically Welsh only. But by the post Second World War decades this latter situation was in decline as for example even rural areas of west Wales had been subject to exposure of US armed service personnel whilst on manoeuvre in the Preseli Hills, to just quote one example. With increasing post-war prosperity and abandonment of austerity imposition, a growth or continuation of holiday home ownership had become apparent in the non-industrial districts of west and north Wales, particularly certain coastal areas. The apparent decline of an important linguistic entity resulting again from a measure of language shift and predominance of English within the emerging televised media and advertising industry reflecting in the lack of perceived importance in relation to Welsh educational opportunity together with a dearth of public broadcast media to maintain and encourage further use, development and scholarship relating to the literary achievements of earlier centuries, was eventually given a political reactionary front in the shape of 'Plaid Cymru', [the] Welsh Party, or

Party of Wales. Probably more important has been involvement by the direct action language pressure society, Cymdeithias yr Iaith Gymraeg, campaigning on a number of issues affecting what remained of the Welsh speaking community, including not just public broadcast media but use of language in a wider sense of greater public use in local authority administration and commercial spheres, in other words in an increasing role in both public and private sectors. .

And so the resulting counterforce began in connexion with increased use of Welsh in terms of education from a primary stage, along with a growth of a complimentary public media industry for younger ages together with news and entertainment developments for adult audiences. The political pressure for a Welsh television channel along with development in radio broadcasting became a reality. The history of Welsh language television really became meaningful from late 1982 when the existing 'BBC Cymru Wales' along with independent television channel 'HTV' divided their programming to coalesce and provide the new amalgamated Welsh-only channel in the form of 'S4C' running alongside a commercial but publicly owned English 'Channel 4'.

Running parallel to developments in public media, and probably acting as some impetus in terms of content, were older established traditions, predominantly connected with language and associated culture. Prominent among these has to be the National Eisteddfod. In fact it could be argued that new life may have been injected into such traditional events by virtue of large-scale public exposure offered by outside broadcasting. And so whereas in the early decades of the twentieth century and immediate post war era the reportage may have been localised to the town where the peripatetic event took place, towards the close of the century, the whole event, comparable with the Llangollen International Music Festival, was reaching a much wider audience, both finding large amounts of broadcast time, of particular significance to the language student.

So, can a parallel for this level of cultural resurgence be made with a small island located between two largely monoglot English language societies? Apparently the periodic reviews undertaken by UNESCO endangered language service did not consider Manx as secure as Welsh. The category of 'extinct' , though, eventually became an embarrassment from both sides. Eventually the Isle of Man Government made the necessary petition:

Responding to the news on behalf of the Isle of Man Government Minister Phil Gawne MHK, who is a fluent Manx speaker, said, 'This is tremendous news for the Manx language and demonstrates the effectiveness of Government, Manx language bodies and individuals working together to correct a clear injustice. When Manx speakers heard the initial decision of UNESCO to classify our language as extinct we were dismayed, to say the least. I was pleased that the Council of Ministers readily agreed to support the language and that the Chief Minister wrote a firm letter to UNESCO asking for an urgent rethink of its position.'

And so UNESCO reviewed the situation. . .

from UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Culture, accepting the points made on behalf of Manx and confirming that its classification will be changed from 'extinct' to 'critically endangered', with an indication that it is in the process of revitalisation. [2]

Of the Celtic group, the outlook for Welsh is probably anticipated to continue an upward graph in terms of numbers conversant with the language. But it has to be said that the data relating to this is not absolutely clear. A personal review of this resulted in some considerable difference in estimates of the recent position. For instance, although the Annual Population Survey initiated by the Senedd Cymru from the period following its establishment in 1999 resulted in a decline of those 'able to speak Welsh' from circa 834 thousand to a small resurgence of around 883 thousand to year 2020, the Office of National Statistics Census returns indicated a much smaller percentage of the population actively responding to questions in relation to competence. The 2001 data indicated a level of 582 thousand declining to 562 by 2011. [3]

Returning to UNESCO finally, an overall picture of the Celtic group as a whole at the time of the reclassification of Manx Gaelic onwards suggests an outlook that did not seem to be encouraging, it has to be said. Under the heading 'UNESCO status of Celtic Languages', the classifications raise much doubt as to really significant prospects, with Manx Gaelic reviewed as 'critically endangered', Irish as 'definitely endangered' and Welsh as 'vulnerable'. The assignment heading mentions 'survived'. Under these circumstances and what appears to be an increasingly dominant role of American English worldwide, this is probably the best that can be hoped for within the Celtic group at this time. However it should be added that if part of a language's function is to have some bearing on explaining a country's origins and progress, then complete adoption by a population would seem to be less important than a knowledge of the circumstances and historicity of a nation. [4]

Notes

- 1 Britannica online: 'Manx Literature' (ac'd 27 Dec '21)
- 2 isle of man.com blog: Liz Corlett 'UNESCO do a U - turn on Manx Gaelic Status' 19 August 2009 (ac'd 1 Jan '22)
- 3 Welsh Government *Welsh Language data from the Annual Population Survey July 2020 to June 2021*
- 4 celticleague.net (ac'd 3 Jan 2022)

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