

Hollowing the Welsh Language
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By

Zane Newitt
Student No. 1604554
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Introduction and Purpose

Cultures, both ancient and modern, exchange words from other cultures with whom they come into contact. The subject of *loanwords* is of interest to Linguists because it helps inform the cultural, sociological, theological, and archaeological historical development of both a language and the tribe, nation or People Group by whom it was spoken, or written. For example, according to John Koch, who is the Senior Editor of *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, it is possible to know that the Irish and Britons fought the ancient Romans because Latin borrows several descriptions of the parts of a chariot from Celtic loan-words.¹

For Celtic Nations, the matter exceeds mere academic interest and is often considered from the lens of *Language Preservation*.

Welsh scholars, researchers and activists have differing views on how to approach and manage the impact and of loanwords; especially and specifically where the words borrowed are from English.

These differences include; how they are studied, weighted, valued or looked at all. This essay provides definition of loanwords and examines the views and attitudes of their treatment by linguists and researchers.

Loanword Definition

A **loanword** is a word from another language used in its original form.² These words are imported and then, over time, subsequently substituted and partially or fully adopted by a *borrowing language* from a *donor language*.

An easy modern example of a loan-word from French into English is ‘*café*’, which means “coffee” in French. The word was borrowed by English speakers then, over time, substituted for archaic words used to define ‘a small establishment that serves hot or non-alcoholic drinks’ and lastly, adopted for ongoing, regular use.

The Concern – Loanwords and dilution of aboriginal languages

For linguistic preservationists, there is a concern that, for indigenous peoples, the infusion of too many borrowed words, in either the spoken or written medium, can dilute and ultimately result in the distortion or even death of the host language. Whether the infusion of words is by design (i.e. cultural imperialism) or the more benign result of trade, or tourism, the end result is the same; the host language becomes unrecognizable or fades off the scene altogether.

Welsh, a language spoken by the indigenous population of the British Isles, and at sundry times under existential threat by the English, has long shared this concern. Actor and Political Activist Michael Sheen summarizes his view of the situation calling it ‘the hollowing of the Welsh language’³.

¹ John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc), p. 401.

² ‘Loanword’, in *The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary* [online], <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/loanword> [accessed 29, October 2022].

³ Michael Sheen, *Annual Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture 2017* [video]. 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbVdA7zS8dE>> [accessed 29 October 2022].

Sheen's views match those of scholars all the way back to the pioneer of Celtic Linguistics, Edward Lhuyd, whose scholarship guarded against the hollowing of the Welsh, had two pervasive attitudes regarding the matter in his seminal work, *Archaeologia Britannica*.

First, he found that words perceived as English loanwords are no such thing. Rather, they were first either Latin, given the shared German and Celtic interactions with that empire or, alternatively, that the ancient Britons first loaned the words to the Saxons in the 4th and 5th century. The loanwords were then 'recycled back' to the Welsh centuries later:

The vulgar error in supposing most or all such Welsh words as agree with the English, to have been receiv'd from that Language, will plainly appear to any that shall peruse Maunoir's Armoric Vocabulary, where they'll find as many such, as in Dr. Davies's Welsh Dictionary, which yet could not have been borrow'd from the English, seeing (as is agreed upon by the Inhabitants of both Countreys) they left this Island before the Saxons were call'd in⁴

Secondly, Lhuyd provided noticeably little scholarship on English loanwords. He made lengthy indexes of French and Latin words, but omitted the same for English. This trend continued to the modern era, with only one major study in the field published and widely known, *The English Element in Welsh: a study of English loan-words in Welsh*, by T.H. Parry Williams (published in 1923). Lhuyd's influence in this regard also drove a forced focus, both with respect to grammar and writing on original Welsh words, or those borrowed from Latin and French sources. This approach is similar to Griffith Roberts of Milan who, living slightly before Lhuyd's time, wrote:

If there are no suitable words in Welsh, we must borrow first from the Latin, if without stubbornness they allow themselves to be Wallicized. If this be found difficult, we must borrow from the Italians, the French, and the Spaniards, and if there be any English words that have been enfranchised in Wales, it will serve no useful purpose to discard them;⁵

Contrary View – Bilingualism as Key to Preservation

A more recent and contrasting view, put forth by Irish born Welsh resident and linguist David Crystal suggests that the adoption of borrowed words, especially in written form, is mission critical to the survival of a language as a whole and that Welsh will continue to both exist and thrive, a few Germanic loanwords notwithstanding.⁶

His perspective holds that the rigid disallowing of English loanwords results in modern speakers living in Wales, who primarily speak English, will experience increasing fear of how to write 'proper Welsh'. By making no compromise on allowing some infusion of English, this

⁴ Edward Lhuyd, *Archaeologia Britannica*, (Oxford, 1707), p. 32.

⁵ Thomas Herbert Parry-Williams, *The English Element In Welsh; A Study of English Loan-Words in Welsh*, (London, 1923), p. 6.

⁶ David, Crystal, *Is Welsh Safe?* 1998 <<https://www.davidcrystal.com/Files/BooksAndArticles/-4128.pdf>> [accessed 29, October 2022]

could result in such a decay of speaking and writing in Welsh 'at all' that the language itself might perish.

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